



Eiko Mutsuhana
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Hello,
I AM A WITCH
And my Crush
Wants me to Make a
LOVE POTION!

VISIT...

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Hello, I am a Witch and my Crush Wants me to Make a Love Potion! Volume 2

Eiko Mutsuhana

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Vient

Title Design by A.M.P.

Editing by Nicole Brugger-Dethmers

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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Hello, I am a Witch and my Crush Wants me to Make a Love Potion! Volume 2

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Eiko Mutsuhana
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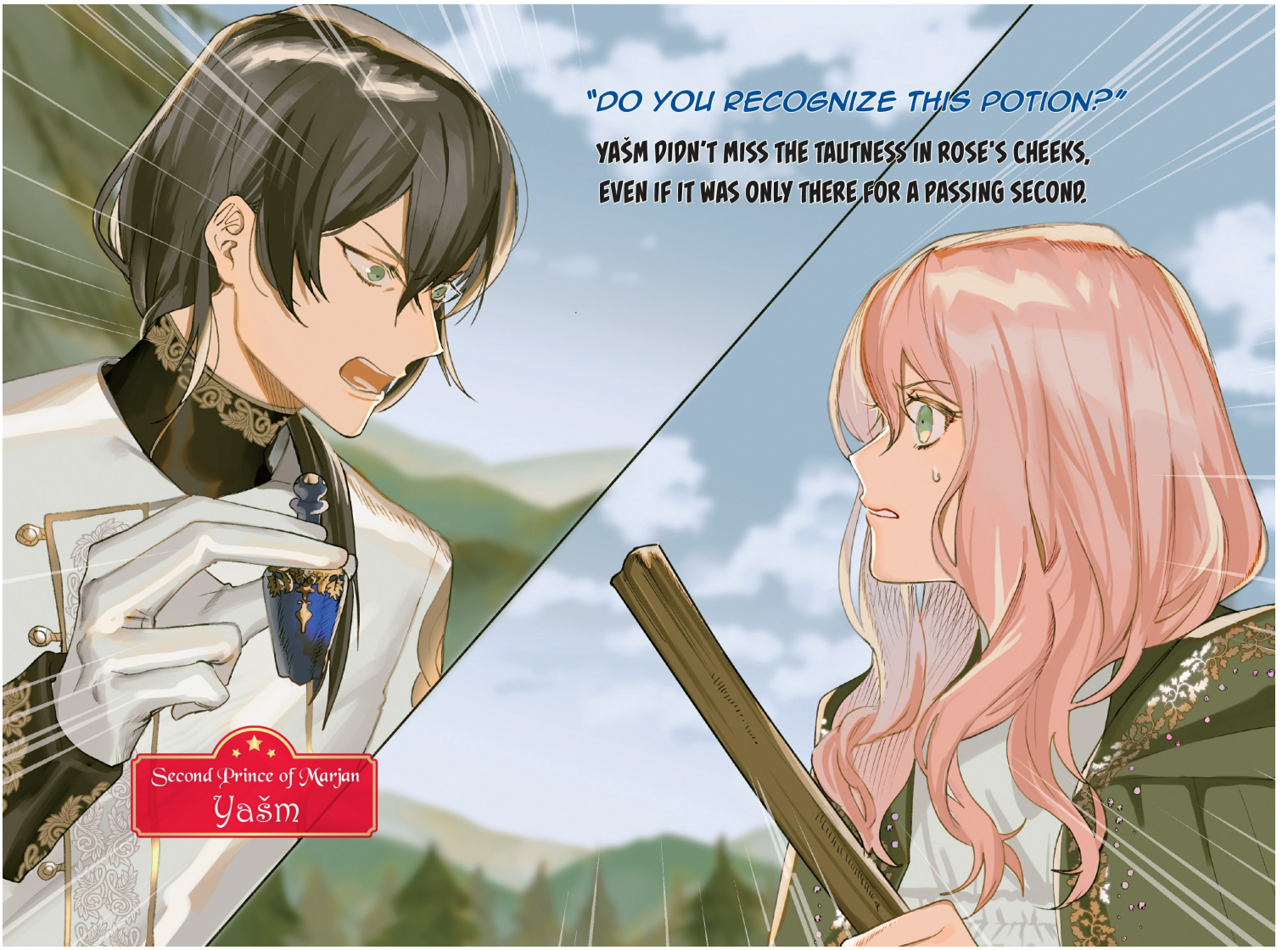
Hello,
I AM A WITCH
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Wants me to Make a
LOVE POTION!



"DO YOU RECOGNIZE THIS POTION?"

YAŠM DIDN'T MISS THE TAUTNESS IN ROSE'S CHEEKS,
EVEN IF IT WAS ONLY THERE FOR A PASSING SECOND.

Second Prince of Marjan
Yašm









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Prologue: The Witch Sets Out

SHE messily folded her robe and stuffed it in the bag, then tapped the floorboard twice with the tip of her boot.

Her bag, packed with the bare minimum necessities, was light enough for Rose to carry with ease. Thick curtains covered all the windows, making the inside of the house darker than night despite being morning.

This was but a momentary parting, yet subtle sadness filled her.

“...Well then, see you later, I guess.”

Sweeping her gaze over the room one last time, Rose slightly bowed her head.

Of course, the hermitage didn't respond. The serene, still air neither said anything nor blamed her for leaving.

Refreshing spring air greeted her when she opened the front door. Rose took a deep breath and then, after sticking a piece of paper on the door, departed the lake.

Today Rose was starting her new life—by moving into Harij's mansion.

Her unrequited love of many years had finally advanced to mutual feelings with the object of her affections after Harij had requested a love potion from her.

Although she was making him wait before accepting his sudden marriage proposal, Rose decided to take him up on his offer to stay as a houseguest at his mansion at night because he was worried about her living in that dilapidated shack after it had already been ransacked once.

While she would continue to go about business as usual at the hermitage during the day, Rose still felt anxious about this new world she was entering because she had never considered moving before.

She wondered whether it was the right choice to leave—and those doubts

still plagued her even after she walked away from the hermitage with her bags packed. However, even if she couldn't be confident in anything else, she believed in her decision to trust Harij at least.

Starting today, she was going to be staying the night at Harij's mansion. He had told her about the general location of his property the last time they went to the city together.

Apparently, the Azm mansion wasn't located in the residential area but a little ways from the hustle and bustle of the city. It wasn't far from the forest where Rose's hermitage was.

Harij had given her specific directions, too, so she should be able to get there on her own if she took a fiacre. Safina was supposed to pick her up in the afternoon, but she decided to go alone because she didn't want to add to his work.

It shouldn't be a problem if I get there before he leaves. With that thought, she left as soon as she finished watering the garden.

And now, after passing through several animal paddocks and shoving her way through the brush, she had finally arrived at Harij's mansion well before noon with little trouble.

"I-It's...HUGE!" Rose blurted as she dusted the leaves off the top of her head. "He said it's the one with a black roof, right...?"

Looking around, none of the other homes had a black roof except for that one.

She had expected the mansion towering before her to be large, but the real thing was even bigger than she imagined. The enormous building was large enough to fit several dozen hermitages and still have plenty of space left. Designed by what could have only been a master architect, the stately home was as elaborate and beautiful as a piece of priceless art. The walls were unbelievably tall and embellished by a shocking number of expansive windows.

Rose had done business with a great many customers during her years as a witch, but not once had they invited her to their homes or given her the opportunity to visit before. Consequently, she could only imagine the kind of

extravagant domiciles the aristocracy dwelled in.

A magnificent stable and even a chicken coop were located at the back of the vast mansion garden surrounded by perfectly manicured, green bushes. Excitement grew within Rose; she used to raise chickens at the hermitage while her grandmother was still alive.

Rose quietly approached the wired fence, and the chickens spread their wings as if welcoming her. The nostalgic and distinct smell of a livestock pen—a mix of mud, bird feed, and droppings—hung in the air.

She deeply inhaled that familiar aroma as she made up her mind to have Harij show her around the coop once things settled.

A splendid chimney towered over the weathercock spinning on the rooftop, puffing out a steady stream of smoke. The kitchen staff was likely preparing lunch.

I wonder what's for lunch today. Rose's nose twitched in anticipation. She dawdled while gazing up at the billowing smoke and remembering the many delicious treats Harij had brought her.

Suddenly, the door opened, and an elderly woman with her hands full stepped out of the mansion. She wore a plain day dress with an apron and a white mobcap.

The woman's expression grew suspicious when she noticed Rose. "Who might you be? Do you have business here?"

"Excuse me, is this Sir Azm's mansion?"

"It is."

"Good afternoon. Starting today, I will be in your care as—"

"Oh, it's you!" the woman interjected before Rose could finish. "You're LATE!"

Rose was taken by surprise by the woman's loud yell. She didn't appear as angry as she sounded, but she also didn't seem very welcoming, either. The woman beckoned her over by moving her whole body in an exaggerated gesture because her hands were full. "Come here!"

Rose stood straight and pulled her shoulders back before running over to her.

“Heavens, child. I can’t believe you arrived this late on your first day. You should be grateful that His Lordship is a lenient man.”

Rose was in shock—here she thought she had arrived earlier than planned, but she ended up being accused of arriving late.

Oblivious to Rose’s reaction, the woman dumped the kitchen waste she was carrying into a wooden container in the garden as she continued rambling. “My name is Tala. You may call me Ms. Tala.”

“Hello, Ms. Tala.”

“Goodness gracious! They didn’t tell me you’d be this short and puny. And look at you! You’re dirty from head to toe like some ragamuffin! This way. Hop to it, lassie.”

Pressed to hurry, Rose rushed after Tala.

They entered the mansion through the back kitchen door. The kitchen had washing tubs filled with clean water, a long wooden table with cutlery and earthenware laid out, and a large stone oven for cooking.

But the most noteworthy thing of all was the sweet, tantalizing aroma filling the air.

When Rose stopped to breathe in the mouthwatering smells, Tala turned back and beckoned her once more from the door into the next room.

“This way, lassie.”

“Coming.”

Rose obediently followed Tala after mentally saying goodbye to the apple compote that had tempted her.

The inside of the mansion was even bigger than it had looked from the outside. Rose stared at everything with wide-eyed fascination as she walked the hallways behind Tala, who kept to the side of the carpet rather than leading her down the middle.

Sun shone through the windows spaced every few feet from each other, warming the mansion. The hallways alone were lined with fancy furniture and decorations. The ceiling—which she thought was just painted with pure-white

plaster—actually had artistic patterns carved into it.

Rose was gaping up at the ceiling when Tala beckoned her for the third time. As they ascended the staircase, which had been polished to a perfect amber hue, Tala spoke to her in a barely audible whisper.

“What was your name again? Morée?”

“It’s Rose.”

Tala acknowledged her name with a small nod.

Am I moving in as Harij’s servant? Maybe that’s how he interpreted my request to only stay at his mansion during the night? If that’s the case, then I guess I have to do my best to serve him, Rose absently thought as she stared at the back of Tala’s graying head.

“We’re here.” Tala stopped and turned the unadorned doorknob with her pudgy fingers.

Urged inside, Rose entered a bare-bones room that was the polar opposite of the grand hallways she had just traversed. The décor was painfully simple, with little more than a homely bed, tiny closet, and a single small desk.

The room was far smaller than the hermitage, but it was clean enough that she wouldn’t have to throw things off the bed to sleep at night. There was a small window through which, at least, sunlight seemed to enter.

Tala opened the closet, revealing impeccably ironed liveries hanging from a pole. She then proceeded to pull out several dresses of homespun, plain fabrics, but in suitable colors for a young woman to wear, and held them against Rose.

“There are a total of five servants in this household, including you, Rose. His Lordship mostly looks after himself. He won’t trouble you much—keep your face up, please.”

Rose, who was staring at Tala’s hands, lifted her chin as she was instructed.

“The gardener comes four times a month. There’s a stable boy who comes during the day, but no coachman. As long as you get Mr. Safina’s permission first, any of the men can take you by carriage if you get sent on a long-distance errand.”

“I see.”

“We don’t have many colleagues, so I expect you to remember everything snippety snap, all right? You’re replacing the girl who left to have her baby. Do your best to keep up—good, this seems to be your size.”

Tala handed Rose a rather plain livery consisting of a simple dress worn under an apron with a matching mobcap of the same material.

“You must dress to impress because we can’t have you embarrassing His Lordship. I’ll hang afternoon dress and formal dress liveries of the same size in your closet later.”

“Thank you.”

“Change up lickety-split and return to the kitchen. Things are going to be chaotic with Her Ladyship’s arrival later today.”

Her Ladyship’s arrival later today.

Rose finally grasped the situation after hearing those five words. In other words, she had been mistaken for a newly hired maid who should’ve come earlier that morning. At least it sounded as if they were going to welcome the *real* Rose as a guest.

“Since you are going to be working here now, you ought to know...” Tala paused, her face revealing her misgivings as she continued in a barely audible voice, “...They say the lady moving in today is a witch.”

Rose listened without so much as batting an eyelash, though she was shaken on the inside. She hadn’t expected Harij to expose her as a witch to his servants aside from Safina, who had already discovered it for himself.

Can I—should I—truly stay with him as a “witch”?

No matter how many times she told herself he hadn’t invited her into his home as a noblewoman, she couldn’t shake the anxiety mounting in her. Her apprehensions entirely had to do with her own wishy-washiness about the whole thing, but she still didn’t know what position she should take in this mansion.

Even Rose had reservations about pulverizing animal livers in a long, dusty,

dragging robe while claiming to be the lord of the mansion's intended fiancée.

She probably wouldn't start brewing potions in the middle of the living room, especially since she didn't bring any pots or equipment with her because she couldn't carry everything. But Rose was deeply moved by Harij's open-mindedness about her being a witch in his house when she came there with every intention of attempting to be relatively human.

"His Lordship chose her, so she should be a fine lady... But don't go making her angry or getting on her bad side, lassie. If you do, she might turn you into a frog with a swish of her wand."

Only the great witches of the past could use such powerful magic, but Rose nodded along with her anyway. Tala laughed with relief after sharing her apprehensions with a kindred spirit.

As expected, the woman seemed frightened of witches, but she trusted Harij more than her innate fears.

Tala was about to leave the room when she seemed to notice Rose still standing there with the clothes in her hands, and she spun on her for one last scolding. "Don't just stand there, for crying out loud! And why do you look like nothing but skin and bones, child? Did your previous master not feed you much?"

Tala closed the space between them and squished Rose's cheeks between her hands. She turned Rose's face right and left to get a better look at her.

"I can see why the girls would be jealous of you with a face like this."

Tala pulled Rose's dress down in one fell yank. Rose, who hadn't had someone undress her in ages, stood erect without even uttering a surprised squeak.

"Good thing the wife of your previous master is a nice lady. She sent an astounding letter of recommendation for you. Even Mr. Safina, the head butler, decided to let you work here without an interview. Work hard, lassie. His Lordship will likely keep you even after the maid who left returns, if your work merits it."

Tala swiftly dressed Rose as she merely stood there like a mannequin.

“You seem to have been hired as Her Ladyship’s exclusive maid, but as I said earlier, we’re running on a skeleton staff. As such, you will do all the work—lighting the furnace, keeping the fire going, cleaning, washing, cooking, shopping—the works.”

It seemed to take less than a few seconds before she was tying the ribbon at Rose’s neck. She patted her twice on the chest as if to signal she was free to move again.

“His Lordship gives us servants the day after the Starlight Festival off and a present every year—you can’t find a master as good as him anywhere else in the world. Not to mention he’s as handsome as they come. Do your best—but also try not to fall in love with him!”

Rose stood up straight and tall under Tala’s sharp glare. Answering either “Okay” or “No” were both out of the question.

At last, Tala left the room. Rose placed the luggage she brought from the hermitage on the floor and followed her. Tala gave a brief explanation of all the rooms as they walked through the hallways.

“This is the linen closet, and if you turn the corner over there, there’s a bathroom. I already prepared Her Ladyship’s room yesterday. Therefore today you will be helping me in the kitchen. Can you make *trippa alla romana*?” Tala turned toward her.

Rose could only shake her head. If she could make such extravagant dishes, her meals wouldn’t have consisted of just lettuce all these years.

“Then, how about *acqua pazza*?”

Rose shook her head even harder.

“Surely you are capable of making a vegetable quiche...” Tala seemed to realize the futility of her question before she finished it—Rose had given her yet another firm shake.

“I can twist a chicken’s neck.”

“We aren’t killing any chickens for dinner. The green pheasant, which will be our main dish for tonight, is already marinating in herbs. Since you can’t cook,

go clean the foyer.”

They arrived there just as Tala finished telling her that.

“...Oh? This is the entrance?” Rose pointed at the beautifully carved door.

There was a staircase nearby, so the light spilling from the atrium ceiling softly illuminated the entrance hall. Gorgeous flowers decorated porcelain vases, and a bench and candle stands lined the wall.

“That it is... Don’t tell me you thought the door you came in through was the main entrance? That was the servants’ entrance.”

Rose refrained from admitting that was exactly what she’d thought and opened the real front door to begin cleaning. She pushed the heavy door open with all her strength, and her effort was rewarded with a view of the stunning mansion frontage.

Now she understood the difference between the two entrances—the main was breathtaking in all its glory, so much so that the servants’ entrance looked drab in comparison. Rose, however, maintained her cool veneer as she took in the landscaping before her.

Every bush was flawlessly pruned to the exact same roundness and shape. The colorful flowers must have been meticulously selected and trimmed by the gardener to always be in full bloom.

“All right, use these to clean the place up until it’s sparkling.” Tala pulled a bucket and straw scrubbing brush from somewhere and pressed them into Rose’s hands.

Accepting the tools, Rose fetched water from the specified well and thoroughly scrubbed the entrance. She made acquaintance with the rest of the servants while she was crouched and wiping up the floor.

She had met one of the footmen once before—he was the man who had carried Harij to her hermitage after he accidentally consumed the love potion. He probably didn’t know the Witch’s face, as she had had her hood pulled low over her features at the time. Who could blame him for not realizing that the humble maid scrubbing the entrance until she was drenched in sweat was actually the Witch his lord was smitten with?

Two of the footmen cheerfully greeted her and casually invited her out, saying, “Want to join us in town for drinks next time?”

Once they finished their quick chat, Rose returned diligently to her work.

But when Tala took a brief break from cooking to check on her, she made an X with her hands. “That won’t do, lassie. It’s not sparkling. Watch me. This is how you do it.”

She snatched the brush from Rose, got on her knees, and began scrubbing the floor. The loud sound of bristles scraping over the hard surface spoke volumes about how much pressure and strength Tala put into it.

“That’s the right way to do it. You can do the same thing, right? After you finish— Ouch, ouch, ouch...” After standing up, Tala moaned and placed a hand on her hip.

“What’s wrong?”

“My lower back has been aching a lot lately. Everyone succumbs to the ailments of aging eventually.”

Standing up too quick seemed to have made her pain worse. Rose took the brush from Tala, who was too stiff with pain to move, and guided her by the hand over to the staircase, where Rose helped her sit on the steps.

“Oh no, I can’t sit in the middle of the room,” she protested.

“Why not?”

“Are you honestly asking me that? Servants aren’t even supposed to walk in the middle of the stairs. How could you not know?” Tala marveled at Rose. Apparently, this was general knowledge that the maid who was recommended to the Azm mansion would have known.

“No one is around right now,” Rose responded unapologetically. “And if they do show up, I will take responsibility for it.”

“...Thank you. Sitting down for a bit will make me feel better, so get back to work, lassie.” Tala waved Rose away, embarrassed to be looked after by a younger maid.

Her back seems to hurt a lot. Maybe I should fetch a compress from home. As

Rose was pondering how to help Tala, she heard a raucous shout.

“...She wasn’t at home?!”

“She left a note saying she was heading here early, but she has not arrived yet, Your Lordship... I was about to consult with the guards at the station.”

Those were Harij’s and Safina’s voices. They could be clearly heard from outside because Rose had left the door open to clean.

Harij sounded terribly upset and panicked.

Rose dropped her arm from Tala’s shoulder and rose to her feet. “...I forgot.” She rushed to the foyer and poked her head outside.

“What did her note say?!” Harij was angrily questioning Safina as they walked toward the entrance when he just so happened to look in Rose’s direction.

Her eyes locked with his so perfectly it almost seemed to make a sound.

He stopped dead in his tracks. His stunned expression was visible from a distance.

“Oh, Your Lordship! Welcome home.” Tala appeared behind Rose. She bowed to Harij without showing a single sign of her back pain. “I apologize for leaving the door open. We were cleaning the foyer... Go on, dear. His Lordship is home. Greet him.”

“I will be in your care starting today.” Rose lightly bowed her head at Tala’s insistence.

Harij fell completely silent, his large palm covering his face. He was likely trying to understand what he was seeing right now.



By the time he sorted out the situation and opened his mouth to speak, he was interrupted by a breathless shout.

“I-I am so terribly sorry!” A girl rushed up the walkway to the house, her hair flying wildly behind her. “I tried to come as early as possible, but the carriage wheel suddenly fell off in the nearby forest! My name is Mona, and I will be working here starting today. I look forward to serving you!”

Mona—the girl who had just approached the mansion—bowed her head so hard that her two big braids smacked her face.

Tala and Safina curiously looked from Rose to Mona. If they were to believe what the girl who had just arrived said, then she was the maid who was supposed to start working this morning. In which case, that begged the question: Who was the girl diligently scrubbing the foyer all morning?

Of course, Safina was first to arrive at the answer, having visited the Witch’s hermitage many times. He looked up at her with a start before dropping into a respectful bow.

Witnessing the head butler bowing to a maid widened Tala’s eyes, as she had yet to grasp the situation. Two people were scheduled to arrive at the mansion that day—the new maid and the new lady of the house.

It didn’t take a genius to realize who was who with Safina bowing to Rose.

“O-Oh, my lady! Forgive me! How could I make you do such horrible things...?!” Trembling with shame, Tala bowed deeply.

Rose placed her hand on Tala’s shoulder, causing the older woman to timorously raise her head. “Ms. Tala, would you like me to bring you a compress later?”

“...Pardon me?” Baffled, Tala gaped at Rose.

“...I understand what happened now. Tala, Safina, this is Rose, the Good Witch of the Lake, who will be staying in our home starting today. Take good care of her. Do your best, too, Mona.” Harij looked sympathetically at his servants before approaching Rose.

Dressed in fancier clothes than usual, Harij almost looked like an unknown

gentleman to her. He was the coolest man in the kingdom, to say the least. He blinded her with his brilliance.

Too embarrassed to stare into the light that was her beloved, Rose sniffed the air instead.

“...What *are* you doing?”

“You smell of sweat.”

“And whose fault do you think that is...?” Harij placed his hand on his face for the second time. Then he grabbed her hand and rested it on his arm to escort her. “Your room’s ready. Let’s go.”

Tala frantically called after Rose as she was being led away. “M-Milady! The brush! You are still carrying the scrubbing brush!”

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“**THINK** of this as your own room back home and relax.”

The room Harij showed Rose to was criminally large. Two, even three hermitages could fit inside it. Several doors leading only God knew where were scattered about. Noticing her giving the doors an evil look, Harij explained their purpose.

“That one over there is locked, but the rest are to rooms that you may use freely. If you need to work with fire at all, do it in the kitchen, please. Let someone know first, too.”

“Okay.” Rose easily agreed to this, since she planned to make all her potions at the hermitage.

The beautifully patterned rug in the room had a deep and luxurious pile that sucked feet right into it, reducing foot fatigue no matter how long a person might be standing for.

Each piece of fine mahogany furniture was polished to a lustrous shine, and the walls were upholstered with green fabric.

It was altogether extravagant and elegant, yet soothing, as though she were still in the forest. The room, unified by greens and browns, showed the care with which Harij had rushed to prepare the space to welcome Rose.

“So? Care to explain why the guest of honor would be cleaning for her own arrival?” Harij asked, a critical edge to his tone, but that petered out when he noticed Rose’s shimmering forest-green eyes taking in the room. He exhaled a loud sigh of defeat. “Tala is getting on in age. Don’t tease her too much. You might surprise the life right out of her.”

Harij flumped down on the ottoman prepared as a part of Rose’s room. Seeing him like this drove home the fact that he truly was a nobleman. He looked made for the space.

Staring at her dashing crush sitting in the middle of the dazzling room, Rose muttered, “...It made me nostalgic.”

“What did?”

“She had a way about her that reminded me of my grandmother. Her graying hair did, too.”

Harij raked his hand through his own hair, messing up the gorgeous locks. “... She can be a little harsh at times.”

“She didn’t scare me one bit,” Rose said with her hand on her heart. Her voice came out softer than usual.

Rose’s grandmother had been a strict woman. She never joked or teased, and she always sounded as if she were angry. Both Tala and her grandmother spoke in harsh tones, but they never insulted her.

Since arriving, Rose had followed Tala around like a baby duckling no matter what she said to her because it reminded her of the time she’d spent with her grandmother. Even if it was only a brief moment of make-believe, she wanted to immerse herself fully in that nostalgia.

“Thanks to her, I was able to set my mind at ease that this is a very nice mansion.”

“I see,” Harij said, taking what she said to heart.

Rose was a witch. A witch who used the lie of magic could not use lies other than magic.

Understanding that about her, Harij had to accept her words as the whole

truth.

He suddenly stood up, approached Rose, and extended his hand to her. He caressed her cheeks and ran his fingers over her temple. She squirmed under the ticklish feeling of his thumb gently tracing her hairline.

“You can trust everyone in this house. The same goes for the new girl—Mona. Safina chose her, and I trust his judgment.”

“All right.”

“He hired Mona to be your personal maid, but—”

“I will take on apprentices, but I have no need for maids, thank you.”

“I’ll let them know.”

No noblewoman would’ve been allowed to utter such a remark—however, Harij didn’t decline Rose’s request.

In her chest, joy blossomed as his words convinced her that it was okay for her to stay as a true *witch* in a mansion meant for nobles.

Harij stopped savoring the feel of her cheeks and patted her on the head instead. “Let me officially welcome you.”

“Thank you for letting me stay.”

She faced him and they exchanged formal bows. A refreshing wind blew through the windows and swayed the curtains.

Chapter 1: A Confounded Witch

SLEEPING early the night before and waking up before sunrise—Rose started living like an ordinary human since moving into the Azm mansion. She deemed it a necessary sacrifice to leave first thing in the morning to tend to the field at her hermitage.

The best part about the arrangement was that she no longer needed to be mindful of nighttime clients. It didn't matter that she had refused any middle-of-the-night requests after the break-in, because she had programmed her body to snap awake at the sound of the bell that rang without fail whenever someone came to the dock. She finally learned the joys of a good night's sleep without being disturbed by the bell, which was set off by both man and beast.

The Azm carriage escorted her to and from the hermitage. She was allowed to live as she wanted, spending her days at the hermitage and nights at the mansion without ever being forced to attend the balls, banquets, or garden parties she often heard rumors about.

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SHE awoke to the smell of baking bread before sunrise.

What a satisfying way to wake up! Rose twisted out from under the blankets, which were softer than anything she'd had the pleasure of touching, and poked her face through the opening like a bagworm. She sniffed the air, filling her nostrils with the tantalizing smell of wheat.

Rose always had them prepare bread to take with her for lunch. Tala, who was a wiz in the kitchen, was even capable of baking different kinds of breads!

Depending on the bread of the day, Tala would make sandwiches with ham or jam, but Rose was just as happy with plain bread.

I wonder what type she baked today. Rose's lips lifted in a small smile. She was fully aware that she couldn't go back to subsisting on just lettuce anymore.

Rose slipped out of bed after inhaling that savory aroma to her heart's content. She opened the closet as she made a mental note of her activities for the day. Rows of clothing Harij had picked out for her hung from the pole.

None of the pieces were too extravagant in design, but the material was superb. Each item had been expertly tailored to survive her jaunts into the forest. All the skirts and dresses matched the kingdom's style of a sheath cut with no flare.

Until now, Rose hadn't owned more than one change of regular clothes—that didn't mean she was in dire need of more and couldn't afford it, though. Not only was that normal for commoners, but she also didn't feel the necessity for more when robes were the staple of a witch's wardrobe.

Though she thought it unnecessary, her heart still danced like a little girl's when she laid her eyes upon the stunning dresses. Her joy only amplified with the thought that these were all presents from the man she loved. He likely thought of her as he picked out each and every one.

WHOOSH.

Air blew through the dresses—Rose had lightly punched one to hide her embarrassment. The dress swayed softly as if being exposed to a gentle breeze rather than her fist.

After pummeling the gift from her darling like a sandbag, Rose wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. It was only early spring, and she was already uncomfortably sweaty.

It was unbearably embarrassing to have Harij and the others fawn over her when she dressed up, but she could convince herself to wear something fancier if she made the excuse "This is all I have to wear anyway." She had already turned her mother's old dress that was full of stains and frayed at the hem into a rag.

"...You got this." Rose gripped the hanger like a snake's head to motivate herself to go through with it.

Struggling to put on pretty dresses was one of her newly acquired morning routines since coming to the Azm estate.

She picked a blue dress reminiscent of the spring sky with shades of gray and purple. Although the sleeves were embroidered, the dress was mostly plain with subdued colors and a simple cut, making it easier for the shy witch to pick it.

She ran a brush over her hair to the bare extent necessary, then yanked the collar over her head and shoved her arms through the sleeves. After tying the ribbon just under her chest, she looked at the mirror.

The collar is oddly loose. Is that the style? Rose tugged on it, wondering if she was wearing it wrong. The collar flopped around her neck. She was uneasy leaving it in this flimsy, undependable state. After all, a witch moves constantly throughout the day. Leaving it flapping around her neck risked her clothes coming off every time she moved.

Thinking there had to be more to it, she reached for the back of the collar, and her fingers brushed against unhooked buttons.

“...There are *buttons* on the back?!”

Rose was a witch. A normal witch never had anyone help them change.

Her grandmother had dressed herself, and her mother had likely done the same. Today marked the first time Rose learned of the existence of clothing with buttons on the back.

Rose stared at the mirror. She was frowning at her pathetic state. Getting changed was the most tedious of activities.

“.....”

She continued to silently glare at herself in the mirror. Then she fiddled with the buttons, hooking as many as she could before pulling her robe on over it. She was unlikely to remove the robe anyway—no one would discover she had a few buttons loose.

The first day, she came without her robe on because she had to cut through the city to get there, but she usually wore it within the mansion. For witches, robes were necessary for concealing their identities and secrets. For Rose, robes were necessary for her to deal with other people.

Rose opened her bedroom door and heard a small yelp on the other side.

It was Mona, the maid who arrived the same day as Rose, who was adorably startled by the door. Five servants worked at this estate, but only the butler, Safina, and Mona lived there. Tala, who singlehandedly took care of all the food, returned home early in the evening before coming back again at the crack of dawn.

The servants who had always worked at the Azm estate readily accepted Rose. Being mistaken for the new maid at first seemed to have worked in her favor. Not to mention the trust they placed in the fact that Harij had chosen her, and that she had a friendly, established relationship with Safina.

People tend to judge a person based on how the people they trust see them. So Rose was a tad baffled by their familial treatment of her, considering that people in the past had always viewed her negatively because she lacked their trust.

“Ah! Witc—milady!”

But Mona was different. She was visibly frightened every time she saw Rose. She didn’t have the same confidence in Harij that the other servants did yet. Though she never looked at Rose with contempt or harassed her, it still hurt to see the girl’s face turn paler than the sheets whenever they crossed paths.

“...Good morning. Do you need any assistance?” Mona asked Rose in a trembling voice as she fought back her fear. Asking someone this terrified to button her collar would surely be cruel.

“No.”

“Then I will tidy up your room in your absence.”

“Please do.”

Rose was used to not mingling with others. After she lightly bowed her head, Mona quickly took her leave.

“Is it always like that between you?” a voice suddenly asked behind her as she was staring at Mona’s departing back.

Startled, Rose jumped about one apple’s height off the ground within her

robe, which caused her to land back on its hem and nearly fall over if not for the arm that caught her by the waist from behind.

“Hey! Don’t play around—it’s dangerous.”

I’m not playing around, thank you very much. Rose looked over her shoulder at the speaker and found Harij there, as she suspected.

The strength went right out of her knees as if she were ascending into the heavens. She left everything to gravity and Harij and let her eyelids fall shut.

Some time had passed since she began staying at the Azm estate, but this was the first time she had seen Harij dressed so casually. She didn’t think she could ever open her eyes again, but his appearance was already burned into her mind, blissfully torturing her with its brilliance even with her eyes closed.

Tousled bangs. Sleepy eyes. A freshly shaved chin. His exposed neckline—the sight was far too stimulating for Rose. To make matters worse, by closing her eyes, her other senses became more sensitive. She could smell his aftershave and acutely feel his arm around her.

Rose carefully crossed her arms over her chest, paying extra care to make sure her lips didn’t break into a smile.

“...What game are you playing now?”

“I was just reveling in the thought that *‘this must be how a devout believer feels when they finally meet their god...’*”

“I see.”

That was an awfully taciturn reply coming from him—he probably didn’t understand what she meant. How could he? As long as Harij was unable to view himself objectively, he would never be capable of sharing in the bliss Rose felt around him.

Still, I wish someone would have told me sooner that Harij would be home today.

Harij’s already irregular working hours became even more irregular when he was working a case. To that end, no one could ever predict when he would be home.

If only she had known ahead of time, she would have gotten out of bed sooner and picked out the dress faster. Why, she would've even woken up earlier! *Grrrr!* Rose scrunched up her nose at this loss.

She slipped out of Harij's hold and nestled against the wall. She wanted to cling forever to that flat, inorganic surface without irregularities to restore her peace of mind.

Ticktock, ticktock.

The magnificent grandfather clock in the hallway ticked away the time.

"...Had your fill yet?" Harij delicately asked the witch who was becoming one with the wall.

"Yes. What did you need again?"

"You *really* don't care in the slightest about me, do you?"

How could I not care about you?! If only I didn't—it would've been that much better. Rose eyed Harij with disbelief over his idle complaint. He appeared to be completely in the dark about her feelings for him despite the thunderous drumming of her heart.

"I was asking if she always acts *like that* around you."

"You phrase it as if her behavior is wrong, but I believe she is devoted to her work simply because she didn't flee the moment she found out I'm a witch..."

Tala and the other servants were the strange ones for openly accepting Rose as the lady of the house.

The nicer Tala and the others were to her, the more nervous and emotionally tired she became. For Rose, who had never been this deeply involved with humans for this long, it was extremely tiring to interact with others while carefully choosing her every word to make sure they never discovered she couldn't tell a lie.

"I'll speak to her."

"You needn't make such a big deal out of such a small thing."

"Nothing is too small when it comes to you."

Rose didn't really grasp the issue, but she could tell he was showing a lot of love and concern for her. She tightly drew her eyebrows together and squeezed out her voice through downturned lips.

"Just...please don't be too harsh. Go easy on her."

"I will."

Rose wasn't an expert on how households like this ran, but she knew a thing or two about servants. Only a handful of eccentric nobles ever visited the Witch's hermitage themselves. Most of the time, their less important servants acted as the representatives in their requests for the witches' secret potions. They were so low in the hierarchy that they were instantly expelled the moment they failed to gain their lord or lady's trust. The fact that her own judgment and casual opinion could affect another's life was too heavy of a burden for Rose—especially when it was a good person's life.

Relieved, she let all the tension out of her body—and felt her dress slip right off her shoulders under her robe as she did. It was common for her to experience wardrobe malfunctions when she was mostly skin and bones and had sloped shoulders.

She stuck her hand inside her robe and yanked her dress back up. But the unbuttoned back collar flapped loose again and slid right back down.

"What *are* you doing?" Harij eyed Rose suspiciously as she fidgeted around under her robe.

"Uh, nothing really, just..."

Both the dress and the room were provided for her by Harij. If she changed the topic to avoid mentioning the buttons, he might take it as her being dissatisfied with him.

"Haha..." Rose ended up letting out a dry laugh. She was perplexed by how distressing it was to be cared for by someone. If she kept living only thinking about herself, she could have easily changed the topic without telling a lie, but it was becoming more difficult to interact with others as she grew attached to them.

However, the funny thing was that she actually didn't mind it—despite how

troublesome it was.

Not believing it was nothing for a single second, Harij cocked an eyebrow at her. “What is it?”

“Ah, um...it’s the buttons...”

Harij scrutinized Rose when she glanced away from him. “...Don’t tell me they are unhooked?”

“Mm-hm...”

Hearing her hushed reply, Harij grabbed her by the arm. In no way could it be called a gentlemanly escort, but Rose followed him without question. She had the strong inclination that she mustn’t oppose him right now.

Harij opened a door and swept inside. By all appearances, he had brought her into a linen closet.

Rose’s room had been right in front of them, so it would’ve been the closest and best option to avoid prying eyes. So why did he pick this spot? She returned her gaze to Harij to casually ask him about it and noticed he was sullenly glaring down at her. She promptly bit her tongue. *Silence is golden.*

“Your robe...”

“Pardon?” She asked for clarification because she had been too lost in thought to understand him. This prompted Harij to scrunch up his face as if he had been punched in the gut while he wrenched out the rest of his sentence.

“...Remove your robe.”

Rose deeply regretted making him fill in the blanks for her.

There was nothing lewd about it. After all, he wasn’t trying to make her strip but help her dress. No question about it.

Nevertheless, Rose froze from head to toe at his order. Not even a single hair on her body moved.

She jerkily turned her back to him, then slowly lowered the robe over her shoulders. Though she wasn’t exposing all of her back, he definitely saw some skin. Just how many buttons had she managed to hook anyway? Was she

somewhat covered? Or was she revealing more than was decent? The more aware she became of his gaze, the more her skin burned.

Harij slowly reached out and gingerly touched the buttons.

POP!

She heard a button come undone, and the dress loosened. *What the heck? This isn't what we agreed on!* She panicked but didn't utter a word of complaint out loud. With her eyes wide and lips pressed together, all she could do was concentrate on each and every touch of his hands.

Harij grabbed the sides of her dress. Whether or not he knew of Rose's inner turmoil, his every move was deliberate. His touch was more delicate than if he were peeling overripe peaches.

She sensed the buttons being hooked as he raised the sides of her dress together. He must have undone the other button because Rose had it in the wrong hole.

Only the sound of their breathing and rustling clothes could be heard in the linen closet at dawn. Somehow, it felt as if the very air in the room had grown thinner. The more conscious she became of his hands and breathing, the harder it was for her to breathe.

Harij's hands stopped moving after he finished hooking the buttons on her collar.

Is it over? Her mouth was too dry to ask. She couldn't speak, nor could she move, because she was too afraid she would brush against Harij's fingertips. So she stayed that way for a good few seconds.

"...I'm done."

Less time passed than Rose had thought. It lasted ten to fifteen seconds at most, and it still left her drained. What in the world was he looking at? She decided to convince herself he was just confirming all her buttons were properly in place.

"Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you."

Truth be told, she wasn't inconvenienced by it, but she was fine if fixing her

clothes put Harij's mind at ease. Indeed, the matter was of little concern to her now, so she just wanted to leave the closet—at once. It felt as if something invisible was trapped in the room with them. Her cheek felt like fire against the back of her hand, which likely meant she was red up to the back of her neck. Embarrassed, she lowered her head.

Harij was the one who said he was done, and yet he didn't move an inch. He was standing in the way of the door, so Rose needed him to move to leave. But she had to summon the courage to ask that of him. She didn't know what it was, but something in the air completely overwhelmed her.

Time passed without her being able to so much as fidget. She felt so suffocated by the oppressive air, she couldn't even look over her shoulder.

"...Um, are you...angry?" Rose asked after mustering all her courage.

"No. Not in the slightest," Harij answered.

"You aren't? But..." Rose tilted her head, confused.

Harij's voice is certainly not angry—but what's with his tone? What's with the entire atmosphere?

Harij must have sensed her confusion—he stirred behind her.

"I'm..."

"...Ah!"

Of all the things, Harij slid his fingers into the opening of her collar and stroked her nape. Gooseflesh appeared all along her skin, sending delicious shivers throughout her body, and her knees went weak while his fingers traced the contours of her neck.

"...holding myself back from doing stuff like this. Get it?"

"Uh-huh."

Rose covered the back of her neck with both hands as she sank weakly to the ground. That moment of unmoving silence earlier had been from Harij staring down her cherry-red neck.

In retrospect, Harij's fingertips never brushed against her skin—not even once

—when he was hooking her buttons. She had never toyed with a person's buttons before, but clearly they should never be touched without extreme caution.

"I'll head to the dining room first," Harij said, leaving the linen closet.

Rose had no reason to go to the dining room when she didn't eat breakfast, but her feet still carried her there once she regained her calm.

Harij was nowhere to be found when she arrived. Puzzled, she looked for him in the kitchen.

Tala noticed her as she hummed and flipped food in a frying pan. "Oh, hello there. Do you need something, milady? Would you like to have breakfast?"

"No."

Rose, who could only tell the truth, chose to keep her conversations with anyone other than Harij to a bare minimum. The servants took her behavior to mean she was shy.

"Why not have a cup of tea since you came all this way, then?"

"That sounds lovely, thank you."

Tala smiled when Rose bowed her head, and she set about preparing the tea. She was a woman with a good head on her shoulders and an uncompromising attitude toward work, but unlike Rose's grandmother, she had no problem showing kindness as well.

She pulled over a chair for Rose since she was standing there with nothing better to do.

"Would you like milk? We just got a fresh batch in today."

"Yes, please."

"A lot? Or a little?"

"Just a little."

"You've got it."

After Rose sat down, Tala placed the teapot on the table with a clink and then added a tea cozy on top of it. The quilted covering, with its many florid layers of

fabric, may have been made by her.

An hourglass was placed next to it, and Tala returned to the stove. Rose rested her cheek against the table as she waited for the sand to finish falling. The smell of fried eggs, rushing footsteps, and the clanking of tableware were all new yet nostalgic things to Rose that tickled her pink. She discovered she had a soft spot for them, though her expression didn't show it.

"Here you are. I was looking for you," Harij said to Rose when he finally arrived to find her sipping dark black tea with just a splash of milk.

"Oh, you were waiting for His Lordship? What a delight it is to see you two on such good terms."

Tala laid out Harij's breakfast on the dining table. Rose's teapot was also whisked away to the dining room without her permission. Aww. Rose was staring longingly after the teapot when Harij offered her his hand.

He wants me to take his hand. I know that much. I do, but...

"How long will you make me wait?"

"Sorry..."

Rose timidly placed her fingertips on his palm. He enveloped her fluttering fingers securely in his hand. He then expertly guided her out of the kitchen chair and began walking without so much as blushing. Rose was the only one who felt so embarrassed she wanted to flee. Who wouldn't be when they were escorted just a few steps from one room into the other?

"Did you get lost in your own house?" Rose jested to escape her discomfiture as Harij pulled out a dining chair and eased her into it. Then again, she couldn't be so sure he wouldn't get lost, given how big the mansion was.

However, she received a firm "No" from him as he took his own seat at the table. "I was cooling off."

"If you say so." She tilted her head, contemplating the hidden meaning of his words as she took a sip of her tea. As soon as it clicked for her, she nearly spit out her drink. She pressed her lips shut and desperately swallowed the liquid—then immediately began gagging on it.

“Are you okay?”

She bobbed her head between coughs. Though she doubted she was really okay.

∴ ∴ ∴

ROSE was excited. She had a little hop to her step and a restlessness to her when she boarded the carriage, and it piqued the curiosity of the footman who always came to pick her up at the edge of the forest.

The carriage returned to the Azm estate while she was caressing a jar like a precious baby in her arms.

Illuminated by the sunset, Rose headed straight for the chicken coop rather than the foyer. She approached the enclosure with feather-light steps. The chickens clucked and gathered at the wire mesh as if celebrating an emotional reunion.

“Have you all been good?” she asked them.

“About as good as can be.”

Rose was startled by the impossible reply that came just as she had uncorked the jar and was about to pour out the contents. She quickly turned around, hiding the jar behind her as she did.

Before her stood the lord of the estate—Harij.

The hem of his work clothes was caked with soil, which told her he had only just returned home. Looking around, Rose spotted the stable boy leading his horse to the stables.

“Welcome home.”

For some reason, whenever she said this to him, an unnatural silence fell between them. After opening and closing his mouth like a deer eating something foreign, he stiffly returned her greeting. “I just came back.” Then he moved on to another topic. “By the way, what had you rush over here in such a hurry?”

Apparently, he had been watching her since she disembarked from the carriage. Her hand tightened around the jar behind her back.

“Nothing that concerns you, *Sir Harij*.”

“Then, what are you currently hiding?”

If someone else were to witness the same scene, they might come to the conclusion that the Witch was about to cast a suspicious spell on the chickens. However, Harij’s tone made it clear that he found the entire thing amusing.

“Can we...keep it a secret?”

“Too bad. Everything that happens on these grounds will reach my ears... Besides, who are you trying to keep it a secret from, if not me?”

Grandma...also known as Ms. Tala.

Giving in to the inevitable, Rose presented him with the hidden jar. Within the transparent glass, the things she had painstakingly gathered wiggled.

She opened the lid per his orders. The moment he saw what was writhing around inside it, his handsome face twisted, and his cheeks twitched. Even that expression was sexy to Rose.

“...Those are...”

“Earthworms,” Rose responded morosely.

Several of the livelier earthworms were trying to crawl up the side of the jar, so she flicked them back inside. Returned to the bottom, they rejoined the others squirming around. The mass of worms she had collected tangled together, creating a writhing vortex where it was impossible to tell what head and tail belonged to which worm.

“They all came from the forest. I didn’t take any from the field, and all of them are too injured to use for potions—”

“...Okay. I get it. Don’t explain anymore. I don’t even know where to begin with you.” Harij covered his mouth with his hand and slowly withdrew from her.

“...Do you hate worms?”

“I wouldn’t willingly stare at them,” he flatly declared in a rush of words. Armed with something he disliked, Rose stepped toward him.

Harij took a step back. Rose took another step forward in pursuit. He

retreated yet again.

“Th-This is surprisingly fun...”

Rose was enjoying herself so much she couldn't help expressing it. It was sheer bliss being the one to corner him for once when it was usually the reverse. But her joy didn't necessarily translate into his.

“In other words,” Harij said forcefully to stop Rose from inching closer, “you were trying to feed them to the chickens?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want to keep that a secret from Tala?”

Miffed that he'd suddenly turned the tables on her, Rose pursed her lips as she caught the worms attempting to make a break from the jar again.

“I know Ms. Tala feeds them in the morning, so...I thought she might be angry if I give them treats...”

Everyone has different policies regarding livestock and pets, but when Rose had chickens, her grandmother never approved of her feeding them treats. Rumor had it that grandparents were sweet to their grandchildren and loved to secretly give them snacks behind their parents' backs. She had no recollection of ever receiving such a thing from her grandmother, but behold, Rose found herself in a similar predicament right now. Or at least that's how she viewed it.

Then again, back then, she did gather the earthworms from their garden. Her grandmother must have been frustrated to lose such a valuable natural ally.

“Really? That's all this was about?”

She had asked him to hide it from Tala, whom she associated with her grandmother, in the heat of the moment, but seeing Harij's response made her wonder if she was overreacting.

“...She won't get angry?”

“Why would she?”

“If she sees me, she won't think the witch is cackling to herself, saying, ‘I'll fatten you up to eat later, my pretties!’?”

“What fairy tale did you get that from? If you are that worried about it, I’ll tell her for you. Do what you want.”

“R-Really?!”

Rose beamed at him from underneath her robe. Seeing her joy brought a smile to Harij’s face, but he scowled when his gaze landed on the squirming creepy-crawlies.

“...You probably shouldn’t feed so many to them at once.”

Rose decided to follow his advice. She plucked a few earthworms out with her fingers and fed them to the chickens. Then she scooped some soil from the flower bed into the jar, covered the mouth with a handkerchief Harij handed her, and tied it off with hemp twine.

Air could still pass through the cloth, so they should stay alive for a while.

“...Where are you taking that?”

“To the room you’ve provided me.”

The gardener would use them if she left them by the flower bed.

“...The maids will swoon when they enter your room.”

“I will hide them under the bed, then.”

Rose carefully slid the jar under her robe. Harij stared at her abdomen—to be precise, at the jar hidden there. He looked like he still wanted to argue the point with her, but he headed toward the mansion without another word.

Harij opened the front door—the same heavy door Rose always had to push with all her strength—and he did it singlehandedly. His strong arms made her heart do a little flip.

She walked up the steps to the entrance, fascinated by his strength, and accidentally tripped. She instantly snapped back to her senses but couldn’t catch her balance in time.

“Ouch...”

“Are you okay?!” Harij rushed to her side.

“Yes, I think—”

“Be more careful! What if something more serious happened?!”

She stared at Harij’s dead serious face, thinking he was blowing the whole thing out of proportion. But he didn’t return her gaze. Instead, his eyes were trained on Rose’s abdomen—on the jar packed to the brim with earthworms and soil.

“You have more than yourself to think about right now.”

“I guess so,” she said robotically.

If Rose fell and the jar broke, the gorgeous entrance would be full of squirming worms and dirt. When Harij noticed her staring at him with deadpan eyes, his face turned unusually guilty.

“I went too far. Sorry. Can you stand? Take my hand.”

After being helped to her feet, Rose concealed the jar beneath her robe again and headed for the door.

Harij, who opened the door with one hand again, suddenly stopped moving. Curious, Rose peered inside and found a furious Tala standing there with her hands on her hips, exuding a demonic aura.

Rose shuddered and stifled a cry. She was struck with the urge to beg for forgiveness.

“...Tala, what—”

“Oh, woe is me! How could it have come to this?! This humble servant can never face Lady Azm again!”

“...Huh?” Harij’s voice cracked and his jaw went slack. Tala’s anger seemed to be directed at him, not Rose.

“I misjudged you, Young Master. How...? How could you ever lay your hands on an unmarried young woman?!”

Rose jumped underneath her robe.

“You were raised by parents who provided such a perfect example of a loving marriage, and yet you are trying to trick this fine young lady into being your mistress?!”

“I am not, Tala. Calm down—”

“You expect me to be calm, Young Master?! I have served you since your infancy, but I have not been this disappointed in you since the day you rode off on your father’s horse during a hurricane without permission!”

“I keep telling you to quit calling me young master. Besides, that wasn’t me, but my older brother. I was only serving as the lookout in front of the stable to make sure the stable hands didn’t find out—”

“You have excuses for everything! You never mentioned anything about there being a woman in your life—is this the reason why you suddenly brought her home with you? And here I was feeling all relieved you were finally going to settle down since you suddenly changed into a loving man! Boy, was I wrong! You are such a letdown!”

Tala laid into him hard. From the looks of it, Harij couldn’t stand up to her because things had been like this between them since he was a boy. No one seemed to be brave enough to stop her. Several servants watched the scene unfold from a corner of the hallway, their faces whiter than snow.

“Give me a chance to talk first. I haven’t done a single thing you think I have, Tala.”

“Then why were you sneakily discussing things you want to keep a secret from me near the chicken coop? *Hmm?!?*”

“It’s not what you—”

“And just now, when milady tripped and fell, you shouted that she has more than herself to think about!”

“...Let me finish—”

Harij was overwhelmed by Tala’s relentless onslaught. Not even Rose could get a word in edgewise.

“I have been looking after milady for over a month now! I was worried when she didn’t experience the monthly womanly malaise during that time, but...I never imagined it was because you were already involved in such immoral acts...!”

A variety of complicated coincidences had led to Tala drawing a terribly wild conclusion. Rose couldn't blame her for the misunderstanding after hearing her reasoning.

"Are you listening to me, Young Master?!"

"I am. Hear me out—"

"Well, well! Men always try to silence women the moment they are put in a precarious position. I will not allow any impropriety!"

Tears filled Tala's eyes. She could even be heard sniffing. She was probably disappointed thinking Harij had taken advantage of Rose. Harij was further daunted by her accusations.

"I will come clean." An expressionless yet inwardly flustered Rose thrust her hand outside her robe.

"...Milady? What are you—" Tala gasped when she saw what was in her hand—she must've seen the earthworms squirming around inside the soil-filled jar.

"This is what I asked him to keep a secret from you, Ms. Tala. This is also what you misunderstood to be in my belly..."

The worms wriggled around, asserting their existence.

Silence fell over the room. The servants watching from the far corner stared on with what could only be described as disbelief.

"Earth...worms?"

"I wanted to...feed them to the chickens..."

Only then did Tala realize her mistake. Her eyes fluttered open as she exclaimed, "Oh dear! M-My Lord, I truly went too far... I'm so sorry."

"I kept telling you to listen to me first."

Harij didn't seem to mind. He seemed keener on ending the whole conversation as quickly as possible.

"I charged you with such a shameful accusation as well, milady..."

"It's all right. This is nowhere near as bad as the time I was accused of being a man-eating witch."

“Oh, you are too silly.” Tala broke into a broad smile. She took Rose’s comment as a joke. Deep lines creased Harij’s brow as he realized some people actually spoke of her that way.

“By the way, I would like to...” Rose thrust the jar of worms toward Tala, inciting her to scream. “...keep this in my room.”

“You may...if His Lordship permits it...,” Tala said hoarsely, her tone suggesting she sincerely hoped Harij would refuse in her place.

Rose looked to Harij. He nodded his approval with a sour look.

Tala breathed a sigh of despair, and the servants watching from the hallway fell to their knees.

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TAP.

Rose woke up to the sound of a shoe colliding with something hard.

The room was pitch-dark with the lights out. Only moonlight shone through the windows, creating a beautiful piece of art on the floor by framing the rug with a square border.

Her curiosity was piqued by the small sound that would’ve normally never bothered her before, and she rose from bed, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

Her light-pink tresses softly fell away from the soft, silky bedclothes. She placed a hand on the bedside table to help her stand.

The table was a part of the dowry Tien had delivered the other day with three donkeys. Rose didn’t hate seeing the furniture Tien had chosen in the room Harij prepared.

After running her hand gently over the side table, she headed toward the noise.

It came from one of the adjoining rooms connected to hers. She stood in front of the door—the only door that was locked.

It was designed to be unlocked only from her side. She pinched the small lever that acted as the lock between her fingers and gently opened it.

“...?!”

The door opened to Harij. For some reason, he was sitting with his back leaning against the door. He had lost his balance when she pulled open the door and landed on his elbows.

They gaped at each other, as if they had just spotted the dead crawling out of a tomb. He clearly never expected Rose to be awake, much less notice he was there.

“What are you doing here...?”

“Nothing...”

Harij stood up, lost for words. His appearance was in perfect order. He was likely about to leave for work. Rose couldn't fathom what reason he had to be sitting perfectly still in front of a locked door just before work. He was still searching for a response when he really looked at her, and he promptly returned to his room. He came back with a single quilt and draped it over her shoulders. She was only wearing a thin chemise, after all.

Rose gratefully accepted the quilt, which smelled of soap and Harij.

“Are you always up this late at night?”

Harij answered her question with another question.

This is why nobles are such a hassle, Rose thought, though she answered him anyway.

“No. I just happened to be awake today.”

“I see.”

“Sir Harij... Did you need something from me?”

“No... Just, before going to work, I thought— No, never mind.”

“What is it? It's unusual for you to be so inarticulate. Do you have a fever?”

“No,” Harij retorted sullenly. Then he began muttering as if a confession were being forced out of him. “...I was just checking to see if you were still inside.”

“...You can see through walls?”

“I can’t. I can just sort of sense when a person is in a room.”

Rose had never tried that before. She was both impressed by his skill and exasperated by his answer.

“Why wouldn’t I be inside?”

“No, I knew you would be, but...”

He was being evasive again. Or perhaps this was him being embarrassed about needing to anxiously check on her despite knowing she would be there.

“For that matter, I am taking refuge here because we decided my hermitage is too dangerous at night. Where else would I be, but here?”

Rose had nowhere else to go. Shock froze Harij’s face as if that fact had only just now occurred to him.

“...That’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

Harij’s expression grew pensive as he seemed to be contemplating things. Even his scrunched-up face was beautiful. Rose never grew tired of basking in the brilliance of his features, but she found something that interested her even more than him for once.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Rose stretched her neck to peek inside the room concealed behind him.

She discovered for the first time that the locked door actually connected to Harij’s bedroom. The other space was just as dark as hers, but she tried to see as much as she could anyway.

Noticing her interest and neck stretched out like a turtle’s, Harij quietly asked “...Want to come in?” after several beats of silence.

She nearly answered “Absolutely” without a second’s thought until she looked up at his face.

He was gazing down at her with eyes quieter than the nighttime lake in the dead of winter. Her curiosity was immediately dispelled. Fear came in its place.

She had this gut feeling that the moment she accepted his invitation,

everything about their relationship would change. Rose may not have understood what his invitation entailed, but her instincts filled her with dread.

The tension between them instantly melted away. The corner of Harij's lip quirked up.

He placed his hand on top of her tousled hair and ruffled it.

"I'm glad I got to see you, even if briefly. You can go back to sleep," he said before disappearing into the darkness beyond the unlocked door.

Rose realized he had granted her mercy that night but was clueless about what it was. All she could do was stare endlessly at his door while being draped in the quilt that smelled of him.

Chapter 2: The Witch and the Mysterious Visitor

THE lake didn't dry up just because Rose had changed. It was still the same forest—none of the animals died off, nor did the trees stop producing fruit because she was gone.

The same, however, could not be said of Rose. To her, the lake was her precious childhood home, and the forest was vital to her work. If either changed, she wouldn't be able to continue serving as a witch in the same capacity as before. For Mother Nature, a witch is but a tiny speck of existence.

One such trivial witch arrived at the forest first thing in the morning. The fog hovering over the lake dispersed through the trees as if blowing away with the dawn light.

Flowers that had been in bloom not too long ago dropped their petals, their time having come to an end. With firm footsteps, Rose walked on the trail strewn with scattered petals. The dewy leaf mold tried to swallow her feet with every step, so it took a certain level of skill to glide over it without losing a shoe.

She filled her basket with the fallen petals, selecting only the prettiest ones with little to no fading—as the ingredients for a potion, of course.

Bending over every time was arduous work. Her lower back was already aching in protest. “Mm!” She stretched as she rubbed the throbbing area.

Right at that moment, she heard a faint voice carried to her on the forest's breeze. Assuming it was a beast's cry, she lowered her hood, cupped her hands over her ears, and carefully swept her gaze over her surroundings.

Judging by the rhythm of the sound, it seemed to be human. Their words grew clearer as she moved toward the voice.

“Is anyone there?! Somebody help me!”

They sounded awfully panicked, though their voice was muffled, so it was hard to discern where they were.

Rose warily looked around until she found the speaker. The voice was coming from a gaping hole in the middle of the forest. It was a trapping pit used for hunting big game.

The person seemed to have fallen into the hole because it was hidden under layers and layers of dead leaves. Someone must have forgotten to fill the pit once they were done with it.

I have this old memory of Grandmother using it... Nah, it can't be. Surely Rose had remembered wrong.

"Is...someone up there?" the person asked from the pit after hearing the leaves and twigs snapping under Rose's feet.

Rose peered into the hole. Sunlight barely reached the forest depths, rendering it impossible to see the speaker at the bottom of the pitch-black pit. But, judging by the voice, it sounded like a young girl.

"I'm saved..."

The girl's tone instantly changed from distressed to hopeful. The pit was dug at a steep angle to prevent animals from climbing out, which meant it was too difficult for the young girl to scale without help.

If by any chance—one in a billion chance—this was indeed dug up by Grandmother, then it's potentially my responsibility.

Believing it to be her problem, Rose reluctantly removed her robe and placed her hand on the edge of the pit. She dangled her robe over the side with her free hand, careful not slip in herself. The robe would have to do since she didn't have any rope on hand. Understanding Rose's intentions, the girl firmly grabbed the fabric.

"Thank you! You can pull me up now!"

"I can't. I don't have the strength to pull you up, so you will have to climb up on your own."

"Climb up...on my own? *Me?* There isn't anywhere to place my feet."

"Why don't you kick the wall and create a gap where you can stick in your foot?"

The girl seemed dismayed by Rose's suggestion at first, but she began kicking regardless of any misgivings. Rose was worried the pit might collapse on her if she kicked the loose forest-dirt wall too hard, but telling her would only frighten the girl into doing nothing at all.

After some struggle, the girl managed to climb out. Rose's energy for the day was totally drained after supporting the girl's weight with the robe. She flopped back on the leafy ground with the girl and caught her breath.

"Why...is there a hole in...such a place? Why did this happen to me...?" Chagrin filled the girl's voice now that she no longer had to despair about being in the pit.

Sludge dripped in globs from the girl's fancy cloak and dainty shoes. The bug slime and sap would never come out no matter how hard she scrubbed those clothes. So much mud had caked in her hair, it was impossible to tell what color it used to be. Her muddy tresses were a tangled mess that looked more like a baking accident than hair, and it absolutely needed to be combed out before it hardened.

Rose stared idly at the girl. Chubby cheeks with big, round eyes. Each of the girl's features was defined to perfection, so much so that even though she was caked in mud, Rose could still marvel at her beauty.

"Aaah! I went through so much trouble to have it prepared, too...!"

The girl had clung dearly to something wrapped in an extravagant cloth the entire time she had struggled her way out of the pit, so when she saw it crushed flat, she buried her face in her hands and lamented.

Judging from her speech and mannerisms, she sounded more like a noble than one of the local children. And if she was of the aristocracy, she might have been accompanying a client. All the aristocrats who ventured this deep into the forest had *business* with the Witch.

"...I cannot go through with it looking like this..."

Disheartened, the girl stared down at her attire and tried wiping off the clumps of filth. She was bound to be scolded by her parents for looking as if she'd just had a mud bath.

She must've been afraid of earning their ire, as she grew even more depressed and began searching her person to see if anything was out of place.

When her fingers brushed over one particular location, she let out a high-pitched shriek.

"I-It's gone!"

Rose was startled by the desperation in her strangled voice. The girl looked as if she might faint as she checked her body again for the missing item.

"Oh no... It couldn't have...?"

Without worrying about soiling her gorgeous cloak, the girl kneeled on the dirt and craned her neck to peer into the hole. Rose stood behind her, since she couldn't bear to see the child fall back in after all the energy it took to pull her out.

"I can't believe it... How could I have left it down there...?" the girl muttered into the pit, appalled.

Rose peered over her but couldn't make anything out. She strained her eyes until she glimpsed something small reflecting a shaft of sunlight spilling through the trees.

With no one else to look to, the girl turned her troubled face toward Rose. "Help me retrieve it?"

Her plea was so genuine and her face the poster child for adorableness that it would surely incite any human to do her bidding with a salute.

Rose, however, was a witch.

"Why? I don't want to."

The girl was stumped by her curt answer. She never expected to be refused.

"I will be...in ever so much trouble without it."

"And I will be in even greater trouble if I can't climb back out of the pit."

"I will reward you handsomely."

"No can do."

“I’m doomed...”

Tears welled in the girl’s grass-green eyes.

Is she going to cry? Rose backed away from her. It might have been her first time witnessing someone cry.

She felt restless for reasons she didn’t understand. She was worried about how to handle the situation if the girl broke down in tears, and that surprised her. Rose was a witch—it mattered not who wept or raged.

Fortunately, her worries were unfounded. The girl lifted her chin and closed her eyes; the next moment, she opened them, and not a trace of tears could be seen.

“I will come back another day,” the girl announced, pangs of disappointment in her determined voice. She wrenched her gaze from the pit and her lingering regrets, and faced Rose. “You helped me at your own expense. I have to thank you. What do they call you?”

“I am the Good Witch of the Lake.”

When Rose introduced herself, however, the girl’s eyes bulged and her face stiffened as she was trying to pull a reward from her pocket.

“Wha?!”

Astonishment washed over every feature of her face.

She did all right conversing with a stranger, but she seemed paralyzed with fear to discover said stranger was a witch. It was foolish to expect such a young girl not to judge a book by its cover, even if she was nobility.

W-W-Wi-Wi-Witch...!”

The leather bag slipped from her hand, but she didn’t seem to notice. Her hands trembled over her mouth, and tears misted her eyes once more.

Depression hit Rose a little harder this time because this reaction was becoming the norm of late. Knowing that just because Harij accepted her didn’t mean the rest of the world would didn’t make it any easier on her.

Rose was proud to be a witch, but she mustn’t ever forget that her race was

viewed as a threat to humans. She pulled away from the girl, drawing an “Ah!” from her. Rose tilted her head, unsure of what was wrong, but only got a string of incoherent noises from the girl. She thought she heard “Real one” somewhere in there.

I already saved her from the pit. She should be done with me. Nothing good will come of us staying together any longer. Drawing that conclusion, Rose picked up her soiled robe and shook out the dirt. Then she slid it on and was trying to leave when she heard an unintelligible voice mumbling, “Ah! Uh! Wai —”

“What is it?” Rose asked, curious why the girl seemed to be calling her back.

“Ah, uh, no way, Witch, like, the real thing—? I’m meeting you here...?! Um!”

“...?”

“Ah! Um, er, uh... I’m a fan!”

“...A fan?”

Fan of what? Rose repeated in her heart.

She knew what the word meant but wasn’t confident it coincided with how the girl intended it. After all, people were only a fan of things or people they had positive feelings toward.

“Um, um! I never, ever dreamed I’d run into you before visiting the hermitage — Aaah! What an unthinkable occurrence!”

The girl pulled out a dainty handkerchief and began diligently wiping her hands clean as Rose stared at her in utter confusion. She turned redder than a tomato under Rose’s watchful eye and frantically tried to string her words into a coherent sentence.

“I...I’ve...always longed to meet you s-since I was little girl...”

“You’ve longed to...”

“Y-Yes! T-To meet a real, almighty witch!”

“Almighty witch...”

“Aww, shucks. I wish it hadn’t happened while I look like this! I w-was really

planning to come back later, after I cleaned up! Even my present for you got ruined...”

“Present for me?”

“P-Please won’t you, um, er, well, sh-shake...shake my hand!”

Two hands were vigorously thrust before Rose.

“...Handshake.”

Those hands were shaking so badly it was nerve-racking just looking at them, so Rose took hold of them, though she didn’t really follow what was happening.

“I-I will never wash my hands again!!!”

A tear spilled from the girl’s grass-green eyes. Once one fell, the dam broke, and she couldn’t hold the rest in anymore. She cried with trembling shoulders.

Rose had been concerned that she wouldn’t know what to do if the girl started weeping, but she couldn’t afford to pay her any attention now. For Rose was more dismayed than the girl overcome by her emotions.

Up until this moment, Rose had never met anyone who had stammered and tripped over their words in excitement, sought to shake her hand, or declared they would never wash their hands again after touching her.



Something beyond her imagination was happening here. Rose embraced an unknown sensation.

“...Did you need something from me?” Rose asked, battling with an uneasiness she couldn’t put her finger on.

Rose had assumed she was a client’s child, but seeing as no one had come looking for her yet and the way she was behaving, she might have been the actual client.

The girl clicked her toes together and stood up straight and tall to answer. “I c-came here today for...no other r-reason than to...” She placed a hand on her chest as if to calm the raging waves inside. After taking a deep breath, she rushed out the rest of her sentence in a voice loud enough to shake the trees: “...ask you to please make me your a-apprentice!”

Startled by the noise, the birds loudly took flight. Rose stared up at them as she answered. “I can’t.”

“O-Of course you can’t... Not someone like me who suddenly showed up out of the blue, looking like a mud monster...without a proper present...and after I dropped the potion I made imitating the great witches, hoping to prove my worth to you... It was a pipe dream, trying to convince an almighty witch to make me their apprentice...”

“No, it has nothing to do with any of that. If you aren’t born a witch, you can’t become one. I have no intentions of taking on an apprentice who can never become a witch.”

Being a witch was more than a title or a job—it had to be in your blood. Humans gave birth to humans, witches gave birth to witches.

Rose suddenly stopped speaking when she realized there was a chance the girl might have actually been born a witch. If she was, then she would be the first witch Rose had seen since her grandmother.

“Or were you born into a witch’s bloodline?” Rose asked, careful to keep her face straight and her mounting excitement in check.

“...N-No, I am actually...” The girl chewed on her words, hesitant to answer.

She looked aggrieved, as if admitting her lineage would dash her last ray of hope.

So she's not a witch. Rose pretended not to notice her disappointment. *But it was a potion that she dropped?* She looked into the hole. It had no way of becoming a true “witch’s secret potion,” but she had to admire the girl’s dedication to becoming her apprentice by bringing an already completed attempt.

Rose wished she could have taken her on, but a person didn’t become a witch just because they wanted to, nor could a witch stop being one on a whim. After all, witches were vague entities that drifted through the generations.

“How did you manage to come this far?”

“Oh...with the assistance of my attendant...”

“And where might that person be now?”

“Waiting at the forest entrance.”

“I see. You can return by yourself, yes?” Rose asked to confirm. The girl slightly bobbed her head in response. “Then this is where I take my leave... If you have business with a witch, I suggest you ask your parents to buy you a witch’s secret potion.”

Rose pulled her hood deep over her face, lightly bowed her head, and walked away.

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“**MY** head’s...killing me...”

An inebriated man staggered and swayed.

“You drank too much. It’s not much further. You can make it.”

Three men were walking through the quiet palace grounds enshrouded in shallow darkness. Two knights with swords followed behind the man who was in a drunken stupor.

“Neither of you are kind enough to carry me?”

The staggering man—Yašm, the second prince of Marjan—glared back at

them. Disgruntled jade eyes peeked out from beneath his jet-black bangs.

The palace grounds were so enormous they seemed to go on forever. The palace itself, which served as a symbol of power, was made up of several dozen large buildings. Each one had a separate function, from political affairs to living quarters.

Although Yašm managed to drag his intoxicated body to the royal residences, the wing with his quarters was still a distance away. He tottered over to the fountain in the middle of the courtyard and crouched down, leaning against the edge.

Standing on guard behind him as he bathed in the water spray were Harij and Geones.

They had both served as Crown Princess Billaura's personal guards until a few months ago, when her marriage resulted in them being reassigned to Yašm.

"You were the one who bluntly turned down Lord Wahash's kind suggestion to rest a little longer."

Yašm had attended the Wahash family banquet last evening as just one of his many duties as the second prince. Since the dinner had gone on late into the night, the Wahashes had even prepared sleeping quarters for his guards, but Yašm started throwing a fit, saying he would return home before dawn. So Harij and Geones quickly woke the coachman, apologized to the Wahashes for putting them out, and raced the carriage home.

"Bah! Harij, you saw it, too! That nobleman's wife was waiting in my bed wearing only a chemise! Fully caked in powder and reeking of perfume, too! With that hamlike body!" Yašm shouted, blue in the face.

His rant was immediately followed by an "Ulp." Shouting had brought up bile from his nauseated stomach. No one would think it seeing him puking into the fountain, but Prince Yašm, with his androgynous beauty, was lauded as a handsome young man with irresistible sex appeal by both the aristocracy and the commoners. He was one of the most popular men in the land.

"Are you vomiting, Your Highness?" Geones asked gently, but he only received a slight shake of the head in response.

It was not entirely unexpected for a host to cling to the possibility that the prince might succumb to his carnal desires during his one-night stay, and try to get him to make a mistress out of their daughter. Plenty of lords had sneaked their daughters of marriageable age into his bedchambers before. However, it was rare for a man to have his wife entertain the prince from the same bed.

Even more so when she was the kind of woman everyone felt a little sympathy for and whom, upon opening the door to his chambers for the night, Yašm pretended not to see and promptly declared, “I’m going home.”

“It is because you keep fleeing from women who make a move on you that there are rumors of you being gay.”

“HMPH! I almost want to commend Lord Wahash for sticking his fork in that ham.”

After biting out that sarcastic curse, Yašm doubled over the side of the fountain, surpassing his limit. Despite his sorry state, he wouldn’t let anyone touch him or rub his back as he vomited. Harij and Geones respected his wishes and concentrated on guarding him.

“Talk about...something...”

“I can’t. I’m on duty,” Harij curtly refused.

“I beg of you,” Yašm responded, half in tears. “Be considerate enough to pick up on your lord’s desire for a distraction!”

Pitying his prince for continuing to be treated with disdain by Harij, Geones started up a conversation with the reticent knight standing at attention beside him.

“Azm, lately you’ve started taking time off like you should, huh?”

“Yeah, because they’re my days off.”

Harij gave a succinct reply in response.

“No matter how much we got on your case about taking a little break, you always came into work saying you had nothing better to do... Could it be you got yourself a woman?” Geones said teasingly.

“Yeah.”

“HUH?!” There was a pause before Geones repeated, “Huh?”

Even Yašm, looking awfully green, lifted his head from the water fountain and scrutinized Harij with wide, shocked eyes. “Hey...Harij! I’ve heard nothing of this.”

“You want me to invite you to the wedding ceremony?”

“What?! Your relationship is already that far along?! Of course I’m going!”

“I will invite you since you want to go, then. Please set aside time for it in your busy schedule.”

“Wait, wait! Does that mean you weren’t even planning on inviting me?! Aaah! How has it come to this between us? I have always viewed you as I would my own brother!”

Any more shouting and Yašm was bound to start hurling some real chunks. Harij answered his desperation with a face colder than the water spraying from the fountain.

“Could it be—that rumor about a witch is true?” Geones inquired with a dubious look.

“The truth probably isn’t so far off from what you’re thinking,” Harij confirmed.

Harij had given his name to the city guards at the Witch’s hermitage when he was under suspicion for being the thief they were pursuing. Moreover, Harij didn’t hide that he frequently visited the Witch’s dwelling or that he was currently living with her. Therefore, it wasn’t strange for Geones to have heard rumors about them somewhere along the way.

“HEY! What is this rumor you’re talking about? A witch? Why does Geones know about something that not even I know?”

“Why’re you so interested? It’s creepy for men to confide in each other about stuff like this.” Sick of keeping up the formalities for such a ridiculous topic, Harij gave it to him straight.

“Aren’t we closer than that, though?!”

“Drop it.”

“And here I thought you had finally come back to me after I lent you to Laura—but what’s this I hear? You went and found yourself a woman outside the palace?!”

“Drop it.”

Harij was emitting an aura cold enough to freeze over the fountain. The rumors that Yašm was into men were but a ruse of his own making, and Harij didn’t want any part in it. Nevertheless, 80 percent of the rumors named Harij as his partner.

“For that matter, you—”

“...Oh dear.”

“Don’t try so obviously to interrupt me when I’m speaking!”

“I am not, Your Highness,” Harij said, switching back into formal mode. “I was just trying to point out a person who absolutely shouldn’t be here.”

Following Harij’s gaze, Yašm turned toward the palace, where he, too, spotted the small figure clad in a dark cloak hiding behind one of the pillars that separated the corridor from the courtyard. Guessing who it was, he splashed his face with water from the fountain, though he knew it was bad manners, and rose to his feet.

“...You two were just talking about some witch, but don’t you dare utter a word of it in front of *THAT* person. That’s an order.”

“Affirmative.”

“As you command.”

Displeasure clear on his face, Yašm strictly ordered Harij and Geones’s silence. Then he stood tall and strode over to the hidden figure with such confidence no one would guess he had a hangover.

The figure shuddered when they realized Yašm had noticed their presence. But they were like a cat on a hot tin roof with nowhere to escape in this open area.

“Lulu, what are you doing here?”

The person went ramrod stiff before slowly turning around. Their expression was marked not by the despair of being discovered, but rather by a flowery smile.

“Hello. Welcome back. You returned earlier than usual today.”

“A lot of stuff happened.”

Harij and Geones bowed as decorum required. The girl, who seemed well accustomed to people paying their respects to her, tilted her hand in a gesture granting them permission to lift their heads.

“Why, I never anticipated being able to meet with my dear older brother this morning. What a lovely day this shall be.”

The girl speaking in a delicate voice like silver bells was Lulu, Marjan’s fourth princess, who had just recently turned eleven. She graced them with the smile considered a national treasure by the kingdom. Her milky-white hair shimmered like a pearl in the morning light.

“By the way, Lulu, you haven’t answered my question yet.”

“What question might that be?”

“I asked what you are doing here.”

“Oh, yes, so you did. But it was such a silly question I didn’t think it required an answer. The courtyard exists for people to take a stroll. Do you need a reason to go for a leisurely stroll in the morning?”

“You do if you hate mornings. It doesn’t look like you woke up early to welcome me home, either.”

Lulu held Yašm’s prodding gaze without letting her smile fall.

“No one keeps a close eye on you in the wee hours of the morning because it’s a struggle to wake you up as it is. What mischief got you out of bed? You better not tell me you have taken after your favorite sister Billaura’s habits and went traipsing around outside.”

“Mother will swoon if she heard you speaking about traipsing around.”

Yašm came close to succumbing to Lulu’s angelic smile. However, the whole

thing smelled contrived, as they were far from her bedchambers, and she was concealing her identity underneath a dark cloak. It was obvious she was trying to sneak out of the palace. He also suspected it wasn't her first time doing this, considering how smoothly she countered his questioning.

"Where's Nana?"

"Her lower back has been hurting lately." Lulu's eyes grew misty, seemingly with concern over the elderly maid who constantly trailed after her.

"It appears serving you has become so much trouble it's causing physical strain on the older woman. I will take over the responsibility of keeping an eye on you for the time being."

"Oh my... I could never inconvenience you with such menial work, Brother. Worrying you is the last thing this sister of yours would want. I shall refrain from any outings for the time being so that you can set your mind at ease."

"That's a good attitude to have. But this brother of yours *is* worried. You understand what that means, yes?"

Yašm's words implied that he was going to keep Lulu on a tighter leash than before.

Lulu realized she had failed in her attempt to get him to do the opposite by volunteering to stay home. In the blink of an eye, she wiped away the grim expression that had fallen over her face and replaced it with a smile capable of captivating anyone.

"On another note..." Lulu clapped her hands together. The crisp smack cracked through Yašm's ability to suppress his hangover any longer. He tilted his head back and grimaced. "I heard you have invited a lady to stay at your residence, Harij. May I offer you my congratulations?"

"Even you know about it...?!" Yašm staggered from more than just his dizziness. But he barely managed to catch his balance because he couldn't very well shame himself by keeling over in front of his younger sister. He shot Harij a look.

"Yes, you may. Thank you, Princess Lulu."

“How wonderful! I just knew the rumors were true. What do you need to move things along? Advice? A celebratory party?”

“Your heartfelt words are enough.”

“How quaint! How could I not celebrate the happiness of the man both Big Sister Laura and Big Brother Yašm adore like a brother? What is the right gift...? Oh, I know!”

Anticipating she was going to clap her hands again, Yašm furtively turned his head away before the sharp sound could pierce his ears.

“How about I gift you with ‘the Witch’s Love Potion’?”

Harij’s ears perked up.

“There you go mentioning that nonsense again.”

“Hehehe. You are only upset because you need it, Brother.”

“Don’t be a brat, Lulu!”

“Harij, however, likely doesn’t need it. There isn’t a woman in this world who wouldn’t fall head over heels for you if you whispered sweet nothings in her ear with that handsome face of yours.”

The corner of Yašm’s lips quirked up in a wicked grin when he saw Harij struggling to respond. “What’s this? Your lady friend hasn’t fallen for you?”

“I exercise my right to remain silent.”

“My oh my!”

“Really now?”

The siblings’ eyes gleamed. Harij bowed and stepped back to express he wouldn’t explain further.

Chapter 3: The Clear Lake, Silver Grass, Sukiyaki, and the Space between the Witch and Him

“I want to readdress the matter of us getting married,” Harij said while they were seated at the table enjoying a pleasant chat after dinner, his voice cooler than a spring breeze.

Air rose from the back of Rose’s throat in an unladylike “GAK!” as she gagged on her tea. She quickly closed her mouth to prevent utter humiliation—this was not a sound she wanted someone else to hear, especially when that someone was her crush. When she finally managed to swallow back the tea, she pinched her stinging nose.

“Umm, certainly, yes, indeed. That was on the table, wasn’t it? It sure was.”

What is this?! A business deal?! Rose berated herself for coming up with such a stupid response. She had pretended not to care in the slightest, but she was actually very concerned about the matter of their marriage.

Rose may have been naïve about the ways of the world, but she wasn’t staying at the home of the man who had proposed to her without realizing what that entailed. Although she wasn’t currently residing there as his fiancée, she wouldn’t have moved in without being prepared to marry him in the future.

And while it was Harij who had proposed to Rose, he didn’t pressure her into marriage after inviting her to be his houseguest. But she was growing impatient, since nothing had changed between them even after Tien brought her dowry. But, at last, their time had come.

I see, I see. I just have to go along with it now that it’s time. Rose pressed her fingers into her cheeks to prevent them from spreading into a dorky grin, only to realize she was making an even weirder face. She promptly put her elbows back on the table, rested her chin in her hands, and hid her lips by pulling her hood closer.

If she wasn’t extra careful, every muscle in her face would give into her

delight and move in a most unsightly expression. She would've jumped with joy and done a little dance to celebrate if she were alone.

Meanwhile, Harij, on the sofa across from her, appeared reluctant despite having been the one to bring up this marriage she had dreamed of. Rose tilted her head.

"Is there a problem?"

"No... I'll move things along as long as there's not a problem on your side."

Well, that was vague of him. I wonder if everyone in the world has to deal with fiancés like that.

Fiancé. Rose was flustered by her own thoughts. She scrunched up her face to prevent her overflowing excitement from showing and ended up nodding with deep lines creasing her brow and nose.

"Yes, I believe it should be all right."

"That's vague of you."

"Oh my goodness. I was just thinking the same exact thing of you."

"What?"

"Nothing. *Hahaha.*"

Rose stood from the sofa, bowed, and escaped to her room. There was a little hop to her light footsteps.

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"I haven't seen you before," remarked an unfamiliar voice.

Rose carefully closed the chicken coop door behind her.

I haven't seen you before, either. She stood in front of the coop and studied her rude new guest—a man around the same age as Harij.

Clothes fit for a gentleman tailored from the finest materials emphasized his tall and slender build. He had well-defined facial features and a sexy allure appropriate for his age, though it was a tad on the sweeter side. His long, glossy black hair was tied back with a few locks left loose around his face, increasing his overall charm. His eyes shone like well-polished jade in the morning light.

Two months had passed since Rose started living in the Azm mansion. In that time, there were only a few visitors: the miller's son, the ash collector, and the mailman.

"That reminds me, Harij did say he hired a new maid. Hey, you. A young lady has recently moved in, right? Have you met her?"

Some might say he was a very unconventional man lacking in common sense to visit someone's home without an appointment and at the early hour when the sky was still flecked with purple. Tala, at least, would deem him as such. She had been teaching Rose a lot about the world, which she'd had little experience with. Tala talked her ear off with warnings such as "Stay away from strange men" and "Don't follow strangers even if they offer you candy."

In this case, however, Rose suspected this unusual man came from a place where his lack of sensibility was permitted. Only someone of greater status than Harij, a nobleman, could skip out on the required formalities.

She wasn't sure if he came at this early hour just to flaunt his close relationship with Harij, but she wished he would direct his insinuations elsewhere. After all, she was Harij's *fiancée*, whom he wanted to marry soon. To repeat: *she was his fiancée*.

Feelings of rivalry brewing within her, Rose decided to ignore the man's question.

She set aside her basket, which was filled with the warm eggs she had just fetched from the coop, and commenced scraping gunk off the soles of her boots with a stick.

"What do you think you're doing when a guest has just arrived—*filthy woman*."

The man was visibly repulsed by the sludge caked on the bottom of her boots, which only fanned the flames of enmity she felt toward him. *I don't think I'm very compatible with this man*. Resisting the urge to throw the stick at his face, Rose pulled her robe's hood back on to hide her mounting displeasure.

His face stiffened when he saw her like that.

"...You're a witch?"

The frivolous air about him instantly transformed into palpable tension.

A witch's robe wasn't defined by any specific design features, but normal people avoided wearing dark-colored robes with deep hoods—because they would be mistaken for a witch.

In other words, it was generally only witches who could don robes darker than night with hoods deeper than a net.

Rose tossed aside the stick smeared with chaff clumped together with chicken droppings.

She glanced at the man and slowly walked toward him. He shot her a sharp look. She took one step closer, then another—then bent over beside him. That was where she had left the wooden bucket she had just filled with water.

With the bucket tucked under one arm, she dipped her opposite hand in and sprinkled water about the coop. She had determined it would be a hot day from the state of the clouds and wanted to keep the chickens cool. *I should probably hurry to the hermitage soon.*

As the man gawked at her actions, he scowled as if he were watching something unfathomable.

“Are you—”

“Ah—”

Rose had no time to warn the man approaching her before he slipped and fell. The fresh sprinkling of water alone made the ground slick enough—add in the straw and chaff strewn about the chicken coop, and it was a recipe for slipping.

The man landed on his bottom on top of the wet soil with a dumbfounded look on his face. The chickens clucked with glee inside the coop as if they were laughing at him covered in their droppings and feed.

Rose glared at the man for a long moment. He was glaring back at her.

After what felt like an eternally long staring contest, there was a rush of frantic footsteps from the mansion.

“What are you doing?!” Harij strode through the courtyard with wide steps.

Rose quickly called out to him: “Sir Harij, please be careful. That spot is slippery because I just watered it.”

At her words, Harij slowed down.

“HUH?! Why didn’t you give *me* the same warning?!” the man complained.

“I was wondering what urgent business brought you here at this hour without warning... For nothing, apparently. What’re you fussing over?” Harij offered his hand to the man sitting in the mud. If this man was the same person Rose assumed he was, then Harij was awfully casual with him.

While she watched the inattentive way he was being helped up with surprise, the now-standing man scowled at the soiled state his bottom and clothes were in.

“You got yourself a witch, not a woman.”

There was no originality in his trite words of contempt. Rose continued looking straight into the man’s jade eyes without so much as a wince on her perfectly composed face. Harij raised an eyebrow to express his disapproval.

“A witch is always a woman.”

“No, I’m not talking about semantics here...”

The man looked as if he were about to explain what he really meant, seemingly under the assumption his initial comment had been misunderstood, when he saw the expression on Harij’s face. Then he must have realized Harij was deliberately pretending not to hear his slight against her.

Harij imparted his thoughts on the matter to the silenced man with an unyielding tone: “I have no intention of debating the matter with anyone—even you.”

“Harij, tell me it isn’t true you...”

Harij forcefully handed the man the handkerchief he pulled from his breast pocket. He then turned toward Rose, ignoring the rest of what the man was trying to ask.

“I’m sorry. This man said some rude things to you. I’m sure his sudden visit must have startled you. He is my friend. His name is Yašm.”

She expected that. Yašm was the name of the royal personage Harij was currently assigned to protect, the older brother of Lau—Billaura, the princess who had formerly been her client—and the second son of King Marjan, who ruled over this region.

“Did he do anything else to you?”

Rose glanced at Yašm, who was using Harij’s handkerchief to meticulously wipe the filth from his clothes. Harij likely didn’t treat him like a prince because he was here incognito.

“He said some uncivil things, but we are even, now that he bears the same look he scorned me for.”

Yašm’s cheeks twitched as the Witch snorted at him. “Okay, Harij. I’m begging you to laugh this question off as a bad joke. Your fiancée can’t possibly be—”

“Her, yes. Her name is Rose. I will formally introduce you later. Come change your clothes first.”

Yašm stood rooted to the ground, directing a stunned look at Harij for the unsparing affirmation of his worst fears.

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ROSE went to deliver the basket of eggs to Tala while Yašm was changing. The Azm servants seemed quite used to the prince’s sudden visits. They prepared a change of clothes and a hot towel for him without even blinking an eye.

Rose accepted her lunch basket from Tala as usual. The sun shining in through the windows had begun its ascent. This was about the time Rose wanted to head to the hermitage.

She was welcome to leave without a word, but she headed to the drawing room because she wanted to let Harij know.

As she approached, she heard voices talking inside. She could see Harij through the open door. He seemed to be talking while standing. Yašm was likely seated on a sofa that she couldn’t see from her position. Judging from his relaxed tone, he had probably finished changing already.

“—You think marriage will solve things?”

“As long as we get married, then I’ll just have to wait for—”

“You dummy. That is nothing more than the convenient delusion of a foolish man!”

Yašm laughed off Harij’s short-sighted remark. The ensuing silence expressed Harij’s discontent.

Rose stopped in her tracks for some reason. Her heart felt strangely heavy, and her feet refused to move.

“As long as we get married, then I’ll just have to wait for—”

Wait for what? His voice grew too quiet to catch the rest—and there were countless possibilities for what could have followed. Wait for him to be able to live as he pleased? Wait until he could have his way with her? Wait until he could treat her however he liked? Whatever it was, she didn’t picture anything good.

It didn’t help that his comment had been countered with “That is nothing more than the convenient delusion of a foolish man!” The easiest conclusion to draw from that, and the most likely one, was that they were discussing another woman, was it not?

Rose was shocked to the core, as she had never expected her future husband to be engaging in a lively conversation with his best friend about having an affair.

Rose was a witch. Witches honor their promises.

To Rose, marriage was essentially a promise between two people who loved each other—a binding contract.

Witches didn’t require matrimony to bear children. As long as they received the necessary seed, they could raise a child on their own.

For Rose, who wasn’t bound by class or family, marriage was an unnecessary contract. She could survive just fine without it. Nevertheless, the only reason she’d assented to Harij’s proposal was that she loved him. To accept him was to accept his human customs, too, and she was fine with that.

Yet for being the man who had persistently asked for her hand in marriage,

his words just now rang hollow, dishonest, and all too impertinent.

One of the grimoire's her grandmother passed down spoke of a cursed text from a faraway land called *Infidelity Is a Culture*.

But, even without relying on such things, the nobles in this kingdom usually enjoyed love outside of marriage.

Rose had forgotten that witches continued to do business to this day because people had no scruples when it came to love.

"...se... Rose."

Startled from her reverie, Rose lifted her head, which she hadn't even realized had drooped.

"Did something happen?"

Harij seemed to have come to check on her when he noticed Rose standing in front of the open door in pensive thought.

"I was thinking of heading back soon," she answered while slightly averting her eyes.

"Where exactly are you heading back to? A castle of needles? A poisonous swamp? You'd better not say 'deep in the forest no one dares enter.' It may be the royal family's backyard, but there's nothing much we can do with it ever since a bothersome queen bee built her nest there without permission."

Rose had been speaking to Harij, but Yašm responded from where he reclined with his legs stretched out on the sofa.

Harij shot him a deadly, no-nonsense look. "Allow me to make myself very clear at this juncture: I will have no choice but to step down from being your knight the next time you slight her."

Yašm had no issue leveling Rose with insult after insult, but one word of remonstrance from Harij and his mouth fell open.

"...Harij, tell me this is just a bad dream."

"Not only is this reality, but I am serious."

"Then you must be an imposter. The Harij I know wouldn't fall over himself

like this for some *witch*.”

“Then I have become a new me you don’t know anymore.”

Harij stopped the conversation before it turned into an endless back-and-forth. Then he guided Rose into the room for Yašm to see while his expression was still steeped in shock.

“Yašm, she is the Good Witch of the Lake, Rose.”

“I see... Pleased to make your acquaintance. Should I call you Witch Rose or Lady Rose?”

“Witch.”

“Rose, then. Have you been living comfortably at this house?”

She’d told him to call her Witch, and yet he just called her by her first name. It was probably his petty revenge for Harij choosing Rose over him. Rose was honestly annoyed.

But she didn’t feel like getting back at him with a crafty retort. She wasn’t in the right state of mind to bicker with the chicken-crap man.

“As long as we get married, then I’ll just have to wait for—”

Those same words repeated endlessly in Rose’s head, distracting her from paying any attention to the exchange between Harij and Yašm. She could barely bring herself to look at Harij’s face.

“I need to water the field. If you will excuse me.”

“...Huh? Hey! Oi! Can’t it wait?!”

Rose didn’t spare even a single glance at the blustering Yašm before bowing and walking off in a swish of robes.

∴ ∴ ∴

IN the middle of the witch’s hermitage surrounded by the lake, Rose sat cross-legged, rotating the pestle. The mortar held firmly in place by her feet conveyed a slight vibration to her.

“Ah, shoot! I ground it too much.”

The ingredient meant for a witch's secret potion became smaller than the desired size. Facing such an apparent failure, Rose threw herself on the floor. Dust danced around her.

"How many years has it been since I last...messed up a potion?"

It was extra mortifying because, while she had experienced countless failures right after inheriting the title of Good Witch of the Lake, in recent years she had become capable of results she could be satisfied with.

Rose knew exactly what went wrong.

"As long as we...get married..."

Her thoughts were entirely dominated by the words she'd overheard Harij saying that morning. Just letting her thoughts stray a little, she messed up her daily fieldwork and basic potion-making. This was a first for her, and she didn't know what to do with herself.

"I want you to marry me."

Harij had denied Rose's accusation that he proposed only because he was still under the love potion's influence. Was there actually still some chance that the potion drew that proposal out of him? Should she question his intentions now, after all this time?

It was fair to say Rose hadn't once considered that possibility. Living most of her life with little to no interaction with others may have taught her that people lie, without the real-life experience to help her know when she was being lied to.

Rose even surprised herself by how easily she accepted the straitlaced and arrogant Harij's love confession in earnest. Perhaps she had experienced too much of his kindness to ever think his proposal was just the passing whims of a nobleman.

She believed his words as naturally as a baby duckling does the first person they see.

And that was precisely why Rose absolutely could not believe what he said in the drawing room.

On the other hand, once the doubts crept in, she couldn't stop viewing her prior wholehearted trust in him as folly. The part of her that had jumped to conclusions turned back around to sneer at the naïve part of her that blindly believed him.

Rose *had* trusted Harij. She wanted to put her trust in him. It was none other than she who had decided to take that leap of faith—and it was she who had to take responsibility for where that leap landed her.

Should she doubt him? Believe in him? What was right? What was wrong? Rose had lost all confidence in her ability to judge the truth.

“...I should just go home for the day.”

Staying at the hermitage any longer would only end in her wasting precious ingredients. Dust puffed into the air around her as she weakly stood. Too depressed to mind the dust, Rose shuffled out of the hermitage, her robe's hem powdered gray.

Outside, the sun was about to drop behind the mountains. She hadn't even accomplished a quarter of what she had set out to do that day. Rose looked from the lake, which had been dyed madder red by the sunset, to her messier-than-usual abode—and her shoulders sank.

She locked up the hermitage and flipped over the sign. With the key hanging from her neck, Rose picked up an oar, and her eyes widened with surprise.

Standing at the border between the dock and forest was Harij. She was shocked to see him there because, while he might travel to the hermitage with her, he never once came to pick her up.

Perhaps something terrible had occurred at the mansion that required him to fetch her. Rose paddled to the beat of her mounting anxiety.

“Did something happen?”

Though she managed to keep the emotion off her face, panic edged into her voice. Catching on to her concern, Harij slowly shook his head.

“I just came to pick you up since I'm off duty today.”

He'd gone out of his way to pick her up. Rose was stupefied stiff. What a

fantastic stage she had reached for her to be experiencing her beloved coming to get her. Such a miracle didn't exist in the future she had vaguely imagined for herself.

Forgetting every doubt she harbored toward him, Rose quickly spoke to hide how terribly shy and delighted his gesture made her feel.

"Then he even forced you to work on your day off," she said, thinking Harij couldn't have sent the prince home without escorting him himself.

"No." Harij shook his head. "He brought knights with him, so he isn't my concern today."

So even a man who tripped and fell in chicken poop still knew how to behave like a prince. Harij probably entrusted his friend to his guard detail after enjoying a pleasant chat and then had the rest of the day to himself.

Rose tracked Harij's fixed gaze down to her feet. He seemed to be staring at her dirty robe hem. She schooled her features and dusted off her clothes as if it were no big deal.

"...Are you good for the day?"

"Good how?"

"Good to go home?"

"Yes. Staying there any longer won't—"

—*be productive*. She shut her mouth just short of finishing her sentence. She wasn't confident she could answer if he asked her why. Harij scowled, drawing perhaps a different conclusion for her awkward pause.

"Yašm said something to you, didn't he?"

Rose was astonished he was still worried about that. "No, he didn't do anything," she reassured him.

"Then it's something I did?"

She couldn't give an immediate answer.

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HARIJ knew the sudden silence was Rose's answer. He quietly closed his eyes.

She had been on his mind ever since she said she had nowhere else to go besides the Azm estate.

Born bearing the unique secrets of a witch, Rose had lived every day of her life since birth in quiet seclusion. He could only imagine the toll it took on her to interact with people every day after a lifetime of avoiding people and concealing her facial expressions.

That strain, however, wasn't enough of a reason for her to go back to a life of hiding in fear under the floorboards every time she heard the slightest sound. Even if she was fine with it, Harij couldn't bear the thought of her returning to such miserable days.

When he saw how well she was getting along with Tala, such anxieties were buried for a while. But when he chanced upon how the newly hired Mona treated her, they resurfaced.

His greatest fear was what would happen to her in the unlikely event something happened to him.

He hoped it never came to that, but he couldn't guarantee he would always be there for her in the future, given his profession as a knight. Emergencies can't be predicted in advance. And even if he could, knowing what was coming was no assurance that he could prevent it from happening.

Even the people closest to Harij looked at Rose funny when they learned she was a witch. He didn't know how much he could protect her in the event he couldn't be there to shield her anymore.

In which case, he wanted to give Rose legal status as soon as possible. Once she was legally married into the Azm family, the world shouldn't be able to scorn her even in the worst-case scenario resulting in his death. His relatives would be too worried about public opinion to abandon his widow.

He took it as a good sign when Rose, who was initially hesitant about marriage, didn't refuse Tien's dowry on her behalf. Harij thought that meant she was open to getting married—interested, even.

Or so he thought—now in the past tense, because he had to admit he might have jumped the gun. Because from what he had seen, Rose didn't seem too

pleased whenever he brought up the topic of marriage.

“So what? You think marriage will solve things?”

“As long as we get married, then I’ll just have to wait for her to fall in love—with more than just my face.”

Harij didn’t mind being mocked as a foolish man. He was content to wait for Rose’s heart to grow more fond of him after they wed. As long as they were married, she would be protected if anything happened to him in the meantime.

Rose didn’t speak much, nor did her expressions change all that often. Harij was starting to learn how to occasionally pick up on when she was panicked, embarrassed, or delighted—but he wasn’t confident he was completely reading the emotions she was trying to conceal from him.

Due to her inability to lie, Harij was starting to suspect Rose changed the topic or didn’t say anything at all to hide her true feelings.

He didn’t think for a single second that she decided to get married on a whim after living alone for so long. But he couldn’t dismiss the possibility she might be regretting that decision.

It didn’t help that being with Harij likely meant more jerks like Yašm might appear again to judge her.

He thought it too cruel to come out and ask if she regretted her decision to marry him.

Harij knew that Rose—that witches—couldn’t tell a lie. He felt seeking the truth from her was the same as ordering her to pluck out her heart and lay it on a silver tray for him.

For better or worse, her answer would be her unfiltered true feelings. She might say the words he longed to hear—or the complete opposite. Either way, it would only result in hurting Harij—and Rose, by default for having hurt him.

But... Harij opened his eyes. Rose stood expressionless before him. Even so, she held his gaze without looking away. Surely she must have been a panicked mess on the inside.

Harij cracked a smile. He took her slender fingers, which were like rose stems,

in his hand and went down on one knee. Her deep-forest-green eyes rounded.

“Rose.”

Sometimes, people need to move forward prepared to be hurt and to hurt another.

“There’s something I haven’t been able to say to you.”

“...Do you want me to leave?”

“Not even close. Don’t even joke about that. It’s not funny.”

Rose stared at Harij after his instant reply without so much as a crack in her stony mask.

“Then are you asking me to share your values for what our relationship will be like after marriage?”

Rose hit him with a second question when it was already rare enough for her to ever interrupt someone when they were speaking. It almost seemed as though she thought it would be easier to say it before he did.

“Oh? You were listening in?”

Her hand stiffened at his nonchalant response. The eyelashes bordering the eyes he was staring into quivered and immediately cast dark shadows underneath. His heart nearly shattered for causing her expression to darken, but he decided to boldly declare his intentions.

“I’m in love with you.”

His first ever confession seemed to echo in his ears, perhaps because of the humid early-summer air. Rose’s hand trembled in his.

“I want you to live in that house with me now and forever.”

Rose’s large, round eyes opened so wide, he feared they might fall out. Her pale skin, which always made him worry, was stained a peachy pink. With tremulous lips and cheeks flushed red, she squeezed out a hoarse reply.

“A-A witch always keeps her promise.”

“I know.”

That was probably her way of saying she wasn't going to go back on her word about living with him in that house. Her roundabout way of speaking was the weapon she had carefully cultivated to protect herself until now. He wasn't going to force her to stop for him.

"I'm human, so I will lie at times. The day may come when you doubt my words. The only unchanging promise I can give you is marriage. Okay?" Harij's next words came out husky. "The fact that you were willing to leave the hermitage to come live with me must mean that...you *like* me, if only a little more than the next guy."

Rose's eyes bulged as she gaped at him with an expression that screamed "What is this guy going on about?" Harij felt his courage wither, a frown creasing his brow.

"...You *do*, right?"

Rose bobbed her head three times in the affirmative.

"Then we should just get married first. I made things more complicated for us by worrying about the laws and legal status, but it turns out—I just want to marry you. You can fall in love with me after that."

Rose's knees buckled. Harij pulled her into his arms by the hand he held before she could sink to the ground.

"What's wrong?"

"My legs, my legs, my legs..." Rose repeated those same two words in a delirium. She pressed her forehead against his shoulder and buried her face. He couldn't see her side profile hidden under the hood.

After uttering her sixteenth incoherent "my legs," Rose fell silent for a while. Then she muttered, "I understand now," straightened up, and took a step away from Harij.

"I think I finally understand what the problem was. I see... I seem to have a habit of avoiding openly voicing my feelings because I'm a witch... So that's why, yes. Please give me a moment."

Several seconds passed as she contemplated how to convey her thoughts

before she finally spoke again.

“That mansion is very comfortable. I’m very...fond of it. If possible, I would love to continue living there now and forever. I am also pleased about the prospect of our marriage. And...”

After raising and lowering her hands, squatting and standing, and pacing in restless circles, she finally looked at Harij.

“I-I also...”

Harij assumed he knew what words her quivering lips and misty eyes were trying to weave. He stood up straight in anticipation.

“...lo...lov...”

The scene wasn’t much unlike a grandparent watching their grandchild trying to stand for the first time. Harij swallowed hard as he waited for her.

“Lo-lov... Lovely clear lake, isn’t it?”

A cold breeze blew over the clear lake.

“.....”

“.....”

“...Sure is.”

“...P-Please wait a little longer.”

How else could he respond to her teary voice than with “All right”?

“I...I lov...love how silver grass grows year-round.”

“That’s nice.”

“I...I lov...lov...love that the food called sukiyaki was first created in a faraway foreign nation.”

“I see.”

“Lo...lo...” Eyes brimming with determination stared up at Harij. But the second he returned her passionate gaze, she clammed up. “Lo...Lotta...space between us...”

“Want me to fill it?”

“W-W-Wa-Wai-Wait! Not that! Stop! Wai—”

The rest of her words disappeared into Harij’s chest. He embraced Rose to fill the space between them, stealing her breath away to the point she seemed to have difficulty breathing.

“What’s next?”

“I-I-I’m not m-messing with you!”

“I hope not.”

As if I could survive this if it was just a game to her. Harij tightened his arms around her. *Does she understand how deeply I want to hear those words from her lips?*

Rose must have heard the seriousness in his voice, as she sank into silence once more. *Dammit.* He bitterly regretted that slipup. He sensed the witch wouldn’t be able to say what he wanted to hear if he didn’t make things as natural and comfortable between them as possible.

But Rose surprised him by tightly clutching his shirt and breathing out an answer in a voice so hushed he would have missed it if he weren’t straining to hear her.

“...I love...*you.*”

Bliss spread through his chest. Driven by a joy unlike anything he had ever experienced before, Harij hugged Rose close to his chest.

She was irresistibly adorable. Harij never knew someone this precious and lovable existed.

He pulled down her hood and caressed her light-pink forelocks. Then he pressed his lips against her hairline.

His fingers trailed down her cheek and brushed the hair behind her ears. As he kissed her temples, he buried the tip of his nose in her hair. He inhaled her unique feminine fragrance permeated with the smell of herbs.

She’s too adorable, and I want to adore her so much, I can’t stand it.

As he began losing himself in massaging her earlobe with his fingers, he felt

two light raps against his chest. He ignored them, continuing to enjoy the feel of her, but then he found himself shoved away.

“What?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What? Really? ‘What’ is my line, buster!”

When he saw her looking more shaken than someone who had seen a star falling from the sky, he cupped her cheek in his hand.



“I can touch you now that we feel the same about each other, right?”

Just rubbing the tip of his nose against hers filled him with pleasure. While Harij was at the height of bliss, Rose’s eyes swam, her cheeks redder than the apples she loved.

“I-Is it possible...you love me, too, Sir Harij?”

“Huh?” he grunted, too baffled by her ridiculous utterance to temper his reaction.

Just how many times do I have to tell her for it to stick?

“B-B-Because it seems that way, with the way y-your eyes look...and hands are...”

What kind of eyes and hands does she think I suddenly have? I’ve lived to this day with the same exact eyes and hands I was born with.

Was she trying to say that, even though she finally learned his heart belonged to her, she was only now realizing what that entailed?

Harij tried to stop her lips from uttering anything more outrageous by sealing them with his own, which he’d been trailing down her face.

“N-No! Wait! Wait, wait! This should wait!” Rose pushed Harij away with her slender hands and muttered, “I can’t take any more. I’ll *die*.”

All the blood drained from Harij. Because he knew Rose couldn’t tell a lie.

“Why? What’s wrong? You aren’t going to suddenly tell me that it’s forbidden for a witch to kiss before marriage, right?”

“No, no, there’s no rule like that, but I-I’m at my limit...”

“And what limit is that?”

“I’m not ready!”

“Phew. That’s all it is?”

This time Rose grabbed Harij’s cheeks and nuzzled hers against his to stop him from stealing her lips.

“...Please, Sir Harij,” she begged in a teary voice. “I want to wait.”

Harij clenched his fists. No one had ever asked him to endure this much before. This was tougher than the time he nearly died on the job.

“Dammit...”

Gritting his teeth, Harij somehow managed to respond with *“I understand.”* Rose breathed a sigh of absolute relief. Even her sigh tantalized him, tempting him to give in and just take her lips.

“Be ready for what happens after we get married,” Harij stated firmly, having made the decision to respect her wishes over his own.

“.....”

“I won’t hold back anymore after we get married.”

“.....”

“Do you understand?”

“.....”

“Do you understand?”

“Uh-huh.” The witch breathed that reedy acknowledgment.

Chapter 4: The Witch Who Became a Mannequin

“GYAAAAAAAAA!”

Once upon an early morning, when the sun had yet to rise, Rose’s scream echoed through the halls of the Azm mansion.

The Witch’s robe fluttered, making a loud rustling noise unlike anything heard from it before.

“Oof!”

Rose raced right by the butler, Safina, who was walking down the hallway.

She was blue in the face and sweating profusely as she ran with a wide stride. Never before had she run for her life as she was doing right now. Desperately moving her legs with everything she had did nothing in the face of cruel reality.

“Waaaah?!”

Rose was easily caught by Harij, who had chased right after her. She floated in midair like a cat held by its scruff.

Rose directed an imploring look toward the stunned Safina, clinging to the sliver of hope that he might help her.

But sadly her cry for help didn’t reach him. Because Safina turned his attention to the document he was holding, muttered, “Let’s see...next on the schedule is...” and hurried away.

Harij, carrying Rose over his shoulder, continued briskly down the hallway. Legs and arms swinging, she stared after Safina’s departing back in the fleeting hope he might turn around... But alas, he disappeared around the corner without looking back.

Apart from the current situation, Harij had begun treating Rose like his sweetheart ever since they had both made it clear they loved each other.

Not to say that she wasn’t his official sweetheart before, but he had been

right in pointing out that Rose hadn't entirely caught on to what that meant. To her, loving Harij had become a normal piece of her life over the years, but the same didn't apply to being loved by him. Knowing he had the same feelings for her wasn't tantamount to actually experiencing it in the flesh.

Harij, who was hardly reserved when it came to touching her before, had increased the level of intimacy between them a hundredfold since the so-called Suki-yaki Incident.

However, he always respected her boundaries, as two playing cats might, so their contact was limited to sweeter, gentler forms. Every time they held hands, when their feet brushed under the table, when he played with her hair—she felt unbelievably loved as much as she did tickled pink with embarrassment.

But Rose didn't have even the slightest, faintest idea that this cozy, comfortable, child-friendly version of showing love was built upon Harij's imperious self-control.

BANG!

The sound of the door closing put an end to Rose's escape from reality. Harij had kicked the door shut after silently returning to his room with her on his shoulder. Once he released her, she hastily fled. However, running too fast turned her legs to jelly, and she fell onto the floor not far from where she started. And yet, not only did Harij not help her up, but he drew closer to her while emanating an intimidating aura. Rose managed to crawl to the exit but was caught before she could get out the door. Harij slammed his hands down on both sides of her on the floor.

"Eep!"

It was the perfect threat. Even a bandit leader would have put the squeeze on her in a nicer way.

Trembling and too afraid to look at Harij, Rose felt something warm and terribly soft touch her neck. She turned into a statue the moment she realized it was his lips on her skin. She let out a cry when his hot breath tickled her ears.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It was my fault. Please forgive me! I'm sorryyyy!"

∴ ∴ ∴

ROSE had woken up at the same time that morning as she had every other day.

She got out of bed in the best of spirits after having a lovely dream. For some reason, her feet just naturally carried her to a certain door. This door connected Rose's and Harij's bedrooms. Harij may have given her this room in anticipation of their future as husband and wife. No words could express how delighted she was to sleep in adjoining rooms with him.

Rose unlocked the door and opened it a crack. Through that small opening, she stole a peek into Harij's room—he was already awake.

"You're up?" He looked at her, surprised. He was sitting at his desk writing something.

"Yes."

"What's wrong? Did you need something?"

"May I come in?"

Rose's question faithfully revealed their changing relationship.

Whenever Harij used to ask her if she wanted to come in, she was afraid of how her answer would affect their relationship. Only now did she understand why Harij staunchly refused to enter her room. After all, she had been dragging her feet by announcing she would stay at his mansion as a houseguest and witch rather than as his fiancée.

"...Yeah. Come in after you cover up." Harij gave permission in a gentle voice, the corner of his lip quirked up.

Rose quickly retrieved a shawl from her room and returned to his. Even though he knew she was coming, she minded her footsteps—as if her presence there was supposed to be a secret from others.

"Good morning. Would you mind if I come closer?"

"I don't mind."

Rose approached Harij's chair. She was careful to not get too close—after all, he might've wanted some privacy regarding what he was writing. However, Harij leaned to the side, letting her see.

“I was writing a letter to announce our marriage.”

“Must be tough if you know a lot of people. You don’t have to be at work yet?”

“Yeah, I still have a while before I have to leave.”

“I see.”

Silence followed. But Rose didn’t hate this kind of natural quiet.

“I was planning to tell you later, but a guest is coming tonight.”

“Then I should leave for the evening.”

“No, stay.”

Harij was asking her to stay when she’d offered to leave; she’d assumed his guest wouldn’t be pleased to be in the same house as a witch.

Safina managed many of the affairs of this estate, which involved human customs she didn’t understand. As such, Rose believed she served no purpose in entertaining guests when she was not the lady of the house yet.

“...You want me...here for it, too?”

She came certified as someone estranged from social etiquette. Not to mention, she was a shy shut-in who needed more time to come out of her shell. Indeed, if only he had informed her ten days in advance, she would have been mentally prepared to socialize.

“It’s someone you know.”

He better not mean it’s that rude prince again. Rose grimaced, but Harij didn’t elaborate. He seemed to think that, like a typical young lady, Rose would be pleased with visitors.

Well, I would be overjoyed if they were a client with deep pockets. Rose kept that comment to her thoughts alone. She twirled her light-pink hair around her fingers—which reminded her she hadn’t combed her hair yet. Only realizing that now, she circled behind Harij as she ran her fingers through her locks.

She found herself unconsciously drawn to his broad back as she stared at it, and she leaned against it without a second thought.

He felt as warm against her as he had in her dream. A silly grin spread on her lips unseen.

“...Rose?”

If he were to turn around, Rose would fall—as such, he probably didn’t dare make even the slightest of movements. Harij’s voice sounded terribly puzzled, with a touch of embarrassment. Finding it funny, Rose started laughing, her shoulders shaking.

“...You’re in a good mood.”

“I had a good dream.”

“What was it about?”

“The time you carried me on your back, Sir Harij.”

She was talking about the first time she visited the city with him.

He had carried her back to the hermitage after she fell asleep on the carriage ride home from a day of getting too excited about everything. It was on that day she had decided to move in with him after seeing the way he interacted with the townspeople and how they lovingly addressed him as Sir Harij.

“I was really happy about it. It had been so long since someone carried me that way.”

“...Who else carried you like that?” Nervous tension ran through Harij as he asked. Rose rested her head against his back.

“My grandmother.”

“...I see.”

He sounded both a little relieved and horribly drained at the same time. But Rose paid it no mind.

On top of the fantastic dream she’d had, his back felt preciously warm, nostalgic—and most of all, within her reach. Rose had obtained bliss like no other. How could she not be over the moon about it?

Rose turned so her chest was pressed against Harij’s back to better twine her arms around his neck. Without noticing how stiff Harij had become, she

whispered into his ear in a dreamy, heady voice.

“May I touch you some more?”

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THOSE were the words that had ignited their frantic game of cat and mouse, which resulted in Rose’s loss in the form of Harij pinning her to the floor.

“Wai— Hand! Hand! Hand! Your hand... Your hand is...!”

“My hand is right here.”

“Your hand is inside my clothes! It’s going under my clothes!”

The more she struggled to escape, the worse it backfired on her.

The nefarious hand touching her leg radiated warmth; she could feel it on her bare skin. She angled her neck to see what in the world was happening—and was appalled to find her legs exposed to the open air.

Her usually dependable skirt, which always covered her legs down to the ankle, had suffered a complete and utter defeat. After gaining the *upper hand* against the dress, Harij’s coarse palm caressed her unprotected leg.

Sometimes their thighs bumped into each other when they sat down together, but she had never felt the warmth directly before.

Harij’s rough, calloused fingers tickled Rose’s soft skin, bringing her pleasure. The flush of excitement and the tingling sensation coursing through her made her dizzy, nearly drawing out a moan.

“You’re the one who asked to touch.”

Harij’s hand worked its way up her leg. When he began stroking a sensitive, risqué area, Rose let out a cry more pitiful than a lamb sent to the slaughter.

“Aaaaaaaah! Th-This isn’t what I— Wai—”

She ached from his touch and began sweating from everywhere on her body.

Seemingly titillated by her sweat, Harij buried his face in her neck and inhaled deeply of her scent.

“Eep!” she cried, petrified as his tongue explored her nape.

Things were set on an incredibly dangerous course.

The atmosphere was unlike anything that had come before. The tight reins he had been keeping on his self-control seemed to snap all at once. In the wake of Harij's onslaught, Rose waved the white flag of surrender with all her might.

"I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Rose could only cry and shout over this unexpected turn of events.

"Rose."

He spoke in a deep, rumbling baritone that pleased even her ears in her confusion. Delicious shivers raced from the sensitive skin on her ears down to her back.

"I won't do anything scary."

"N-N-N...b-b-bu...mm...ngh...w-wh-wha—"

She couldn't even pronounce words anymore. Harij cupped her cheeks in his hands, locking gazes with her.

"Do you really want me to stop?" he asked in a breathy voice. Heat surged through her when she noticed how moist his perfectly shaped lips were.

"You're too cute... I love you so much. *Please.*"

His lips pressed against her cheek because of the position he held while talking to her. They lingered there, teasing her. Pleasure coursed through her for the hundredth time. Her whole body shivered.

"Rose."

Her skin absorbed her arousal, gaining a tingling numbness.

Hearing him call her name in that heady, pleading voice put an end to her thinking. She didn't even understand why she was so against going forward with this in the first place.

She stared at Harij through misty eyes. His own burned with the same passion they'd had right after he drank the love potion.

Rose opened her trembling lips. "...Um, ah, oka—"

Harij suddenly moved off her just as she was about to give permission. He approached the window with agile strides and looked down.

“...Does he have clairvoyance or something?”

The romantic mood completely dissipated. Reluctance to accept reality and a hint of disappointment entered his suddenly tired voice.

Rose utterly failed to follow the sudden shift in his behavior. Propping herself up on her elbows, she stared at Harij, her lips slightly parted.

Harij turned around and noticed the way she was lying. He slowly approached her with a wry smile. She took his hand and stood. Then he kneeled before her and fixed her disheveled skirt.

Rose’s cheeks turned pinker than a peach as she recalled what they had been about to do. She sure stayed in that dumb position for longer than necessary. Harij must have guessed she was disappointed it ended there and that she was entirely clueless about how to act in these situations. Ashamed she didn’t even have half a mind to fix her clothes, Rose hung her head. His hand stroked her hair, and he planted a longing kiss on the back of her ear.

“...Let’s head downstairs. We have a guest.”

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“**BOY**, am I sorry. I can’t believe I got our appointment wrong by half a day. Did I surprise you by arriving early?”

“It isn’t a problem. If I may interrupt, I want that item over here and the other one placed on top of the sideboard...”

Harij handled their sudden visitor with nonchalance. The attendants Tien brought with him bustled in and out of the room carrying large packages behind them.

An unexpected guest had arrived at the usually serene entrance to the Azm mansion. It was none other than the merchant Rose often did business with—Tien Công. He had taken up the mantle of acting like Rose’s older brother—and, at times, her guardian.

Tien had to be the guest Harij had mentioned would be coming that evening.

Only Rose was surprised by his sudden visit, as Harij seemed ready to welcome him. But because he chose to intrude so early in the morning, Rose was forced to send a servant to her hermitage in her stead.

For a merchant to come before the sun had even finished its ascent into the sky could only mean one thing—he did it on purpose, to surprise Rose. She glared at him, for he had indeed succeeded at that.

Just recalling what she had been about to do when Tien interrupted them plunged Rose into an awkward, inexpressible mood. She had never experienced it for herself, but she assumed this must be how teenagers felt when they were caught making out by their parents. To distract from her antsiness, she directed her attention and annoyance at the luggage being brought inside.

“You aren’t going to claim this is the remainder of my dowry, are you?” she remarked in the sour voice of a pouting child.

“While I have a great deal of interest in you and love you like family, neither of those reasons is enough for me to be giving this much away for free. Besides, I told you last time that I prepared the majority of your dowry with the money entrusted to me by the Great Witch while she was still alive.”

Tien had definitely mentioned that before, but she thought he was exaggerating. The witches’ secret potions sold for exorbitant amounts, but the ingredients also cost an arm and a leg. Witches profited big and lost big.

Rose never wanted for anything, but her life with her grandmother was a far cry from anything that could be called luxurious.

She wholly doubted her grandmother was capable of preparing such a large dowry.

Or could it be that her grandmother lived so frugally because she knew Rose would end up alone in the not-so-distant future? To support Rose even after she was gone?

Thinking about her grandmother sank Rose into melancholy. Every time she realized how much her grandmother sacrificed for her, she was overjoyed, but it also filled her with regret, as she was forced to acknowledge how poorly she treated her in return, in the way all teenagers rebel against their elders. Now, as

a more mature adult, she could never make it up to her.

“Someone’s in a pouty mood... What? Did I possibly intrude just as things were getting good between you two? But you need to save your chastity for your wedding night, you know?” Tien whispered in her ear, dragging her out of her pensive thoughts and earning a hard stomp on the foot in return for his crass remark.

“...Are you ready to head into the parlor?”

Tien stopped clutching his foot in a deliberate show of being in pain and followed Harij to the parlor. Rose trailed behind Tien. They had apparently finished carrying in the large stacks of items from the wagons. Now dresses, fabrics, and shoes hanging from partitions and hangers were being brought into the Azm mansion parlor.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but can you move that fabric somewhere out of direct sunlight? Those accessories, too.”

“Do as he says.”

Harij immediately deferred to Tien’s wishes. As of this morning, Rose thought Harij’s attitude toward Tien had softened considerably since last time. They seemed to have been communicating without her knowledge. Harij had once even said he wouldn’t accept a single present from Tien, but somewhere along the line, he seemed to have come to acknowledge the other man as a part of Rose’s family.

“I carefully selected every piece with you both in mind but ended up bringing a lot of variety because I want you to be absolutely satisfied.”

The two men confidently wove their way through the room cluttered with so many goods there was barely an open place to step.

“Variety is good... Rose, come over here, too.”

Beckoned by Harij, Rose hopped from spot to spot as she worked her way through the limited openings in the items begging to be picked, and finally settled on top of the couch. Tien opened a catalog in front of her, the exotic accessories on his sleeves glittering under the lights as he did.

As a merchant who traveled the world hawking his wares, Tien often dressed in clothes so gaudy they stung the eyes. At times he looked younger than Rose, while at others, he looked much older than her, which she attributed to his ethnicity, which was rare in these parts.

“This particular design popular in the western nations would look stunning on Rose.”

The design catalogs piled up like a mountain as he laid them out on the table.

“She should pick whichever design she likes best.”

“Brides always care about their groom’s tastes. What are yours, Harij?”

She thought this might be the case, but it appeared they really were here to discuss tailoring clothes for Rose. But she had already received more dresses than could fit in her closet from Harij and Tien. She gulped and began preparing her escape when Harij plopped down on the couch beside her.

“Do you have any preferences?”

“Me...?”

Realizing her escape plan was botched, Rose glanced around the room. What in the world should she choose from the sea of dresses and endless waves of fabric? The stress of the situation, coupled with Harij’s close proximity, caused her to break into a sweat.

“I have no idea...how to answer that...”

Rose still didn’t even know why Tien had suddenly visited on this day.

Harij and Tien had her stand, since she would only glare down at the design catalogs, and they commenced holding different fabrics up to her as if she were a living mannequin.

Her only job: to be perfectly still. *Today has been filled with nothing but exhausting ordeals from the wee hours of the morning*, she thought, her gaze drifting out the window where she noticed blue had painted over the formerly purple sky. Quite a lot of time had passed since Tien’s arrival.

“...Oh? Sir Harij! Shouldn’t you be getting to work soon?”

“I switched my schedule to work in the afternoon today, so we have plenty of time.”

I hope he didn't switch just for this!

They draped a lapis lazuli–blue fabric over her right shoulder and a periwinkle fabric over the left while she was busy being flustered over Harij's schedule changes.

“Don't you think bright pastel colors suit her best?”

“Elegant colors suit her well, too.”

“I know Rose is concerned with standing out too much in a crowd, but dark colors make her look old. A rosy-cheeked bride shouldn't look like she's going to her own funeral.”

“Hey! That's rude!” Rose quipped, unable to let Tien's insult pass. But he didn't even acknowledge her interruption.

“I recommend these colors over here: rose red, chartreuse green, saffron...”

“Don't you think the parrot green is easier on the eyes...?” Harij responded.

Rose squirmed away from the brightness reflecting off the striking bolt of cloth Tien held up.

“You don't have to decide everything today, but you should pick out your fabric sooner rather than later.”

“Ugh,” Rose groaned. She had a harder time fighting back when he worded it like that. It was always like this between them. She didn't know how Tien pulled it off, but he'd manipulated her into wanting to decide this instant.

“Just one?”

“That's it. Though you're welcome to pick as many as you like.”

She pressed her lips together and looked around the room. Tien's personal recommendations aside, he'd made sure to also bring a variety of colors and fabrics. Rose didn't know how or what to choose, but one bolt of cloth kept drawing her attention back to it. It was the color she felt most comfortable wearing.

“...I like that one.”

Rose pointed to a pitch-black fabric reminiscent of the nighttime lake in the dead of winter.

“Of course it comes back to that.” Tien glanced in Harij’s direction, seeking his approval, though he seemed not at all surprised or bothered by her choice. “Are you all right with her picking that color?”

“Absolutely,” Harij responded without a moment’s delay. He had no issues with anything she decided for herself.

“It’s not a bad choice. The fabric has a glossy finish, which will look stunning under the lights. Black dresses also have the double meaning of ‘I will never be dyed in the color of another.’”

“You like your superstitions, don’t you?”

“I am a merchant, after all. Besides, a black wedding dress is perfect for a witch.”

“...What’s a wedding...dress?”

Harij and Tien were rendered speechless by Rose’s genuine question. Tien showed his astonishment in the most exaggerated way.

“...How could I have failed you so? I should have made sure to better instruct you in the basic ways of the world.”

Rose was giving Tien the evil eye, as he still hadn’t let up on treating her like a child, when Harij spoke up, his voice concerned.

“Rose, do you know what a wedding ceremony is?”

“Marriage requires a special kind of ceremony to become official, right?”

Witches didn’t marry, and forest animals didn’t hold wedding ceremonies.

Rose had always thought weddings were simply where you made a vow to become family—she severely lacked knowledge regarding matrimony in general.

“That’s right. People are invited to attend this special ceremony. A gorgeous dress like this one is needed for the occasion. Naturally, you can’t wear a robe

over it.”

“Heh.”

So that’s how it works. Rose nodded along with Tien’s harmless explanation. He had picked up a formal gown to show her, one with a considerable lack of fabric to cover the shoulders and chest. It was completely different in design and purpose from the simple garb Rose usually wore to disguise herself as a village girl.

“...Wait, what?” Rose finally put two and two together during the brief silence that followed. “Wear this without a robe? Who will? You can’t possibly mean me?” she asked, with the extra implication that they couldn’t possibly expect her to wear it.

Harij and Tien both gave big nods.

“...Haha.” A dry laugh spilled past her chapped lips.

“.....”

She took another good, hard look at the dress Tien brought over. Silence was her only answer. A muscle in her jaw twitched.

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t dress for appearances’ sake. Thus, Rose felt a greater sense of shame than normal for dressing up. She couldn’t even bring herself to put on rouge. Should a day ever come when she overhears someone comment, “What’s that witch scheming by making herself look pretty?” her humiliation would surely shatter, piercing her in the heart and killing her for good.

“Please,” Harij said in a tight voice. “This will be the first and last time I ask you to wear a formal gown. So please do it for me.”

He was serious.

“Is a glamorous dress that vital to a wedding ceremony?”

“It is—but when it comes down to it, I just want to see you wearing one, Rose.”

Harij was laying bare his true feelings, silencing Rose once more.

Of course Rose wanted to gladly wear the dress the man she loved implored of her. But her discomfiture reigned supreme.

Tien had just mentioned people would be invited to the ceremony. They would surely wonder, “What’s that witch’s problem, dressing so seductively? Did she enchant him?” She was well aware she was no beauty and absolutely did not want people thinking she was trying hard to become one.

“Mmmmm...”

“I will make it worth your while if you wear it. Ask anything of me in return.”

Rose lifted her head. Making a trade was something she could agree to.

“...I can ask for anything at all?”

“...As long as it’s within my power.”

This time Rose seriously contemplated his request. She placed her greatest desire and the ridicule of others on her internal scale. The balance tipped all the way to one side without ever swaying.

“...All right. It is a promise, then.”

Rose was a witch. Keeping promises was the foundation of a witch’s existence. If the deal was mutually beneficial, this witch was broad-minded enough to overlook earth-shattering humiliation.

“Really? Do you already have something in mind?”

“Yes,” Rose said flatly.

“Go ahead and ask. That way, I can prepare it.”

Rose faltered when Harij put her on the spot. It was too embarrassing to say out loud.

She glanced at Tien. He pretended not to be listening to them, but he so was. Rose knew it.

“Not now...”

“Why?”

“It’s not just us...,” she mumbled.

Harij froze when he saw the expression on her face. Red tinged the sides of his ears, and he cleared his throat.

“...All right, if that’s what you want. Let’s discuss it next time we’re alone—”

“Harij, I hate to interrupt when you’re anticipating something good, but I’m fairly positive you can hear her out now.”

See! I knew he was listening! Rose glared at Tien, who only grinned back. *Damn fox!* She cursed him in her thoughts.

“...What *is* it you want?” Harij asked, his expression instantly shifting from hopeful to sullen.

“Now?”

He expects me to say it now? Rose was at a loss for words.

“Tien is... Tien is here, so...”

“What does it matter if I’m present? You probably just want him to get you some exotic bug’s leg or rare bird’s tail feather, right?”

“No way. I wouldn’t waste this opportunity to ask him to get me something money can buy. I simply wanted Sir Harij to don his full knight’s attire for—”

Rose clapped her hands over her mouth. She just blurted out her request in the heat of the moment. Telling Harij was embarrassing enough—saying it in front of Tien was a serious gaffe. He was sure to tease her senseless with it.

She chose to ignore him for the time being and look at Harij instead. Harij returned her look with a grim expression.

“...Is it too much to ask?”

Rose fell in love with him when she saw him for the first time in his knight attire. And she fell in love with him all over again in the same clothes during Billaura’s bridal procession. It was her fervent wish to someday see him dressed like that up close. But it was not as if she had a reason to visit him at the palace, and even if she did go, how far would she make it before the other knights apprehended her on charges of being a suspicious witch?

In return for her wearing a gown, she requested he wear his formal knight

attire. She didn't think it an inappropriate exchange, but the look on Harij's face made her wonder if he wasn't permitted to bring those clothes home.

Prepared to be disappointed, she waited for his verdict. Harij tottered over to her and—pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Oomph!"

"...You're too cute."

"Ueee!" Rose yelped again. She pounded on his back to signal she needed air and was finally released from his hold.

"So cu—"

"You will never hear me say it again, okay?!"

With both hands, Rose sealed his lips from spouting more nonsense. Harij looked more satisfied than ever.

"I will make it happen for you."

"You absolutely must."

"...Are you guys always like this?"

Rose had never heard Tien sound so uncomfortable before.

"You're a lucky man, Harij. You have the Witch's love. Last time I made a deal with her, I got stuck with plucking 666 fleas off a cat by hand."

Rose's gaze pierced Tien from under her hood.

"Go home, Tien. I picked a fabric. We're done here, right?"

"No, he doesn't need to leave. You can discuss the design with him some more. I have to head out soon," Harij said, putting his arms through the sleeves of the jacket Safina—who had appeared out of thin air, it seemed—held out for him. "Do whatever Rose wants for the dress. Safina, take care of things while I'm gone."

"As you wish."

Harij left the parlor with long strides. He was probably heading to work. Rose hurried after him.

“...What’s wrong?” Harij turned toward Rose with a puzzled expression when he heard her quick footsteps behind him. “Did you have more you wanted to say?”

“Yes. I wanted to see you off to work if that’s okay.”

“...I see. Sure,” Harij said in a quiet voice with a slight nod.

Rose had never seen Harij to the door like this before. There was so much she was uncertain about, her feet just naturally brought her here.

“Also...about the dress... Is there anything specific you would like to have done?”

“No. You can tailor it to your exact preferences.”

“Then is there anything I should absolutely avoid doing?”

“You don’t have to worry about anything like that, either. I’m sure Tien will speak up if you make any culturally offensive choices. He won’t do anything to put you in a bad spot. He’s here to help you.”

Rose’s thoughts lingered on the time Harij became so jealous he told her not to accept gifts from other men. She assumed everything was all right now that the misunderstandings had been resolved, but...she decided to make sure, just in case.

“Is it really all right for me to decide with Tien?”

“Yes. He knows more about the most popular fashions and trends than I do.”

“Not in that sense, um...because Tien is a man?”

No matter how she phrased it, she thought she would come across sounding overly self-conscious and somehow found herself framing it in the most embarrassing way possible.

“...I would never strip you of your family after already making you leave the forest you call home.”

Strictly speaking, Tien wasn’t family. But if that’s how Harij chose to view him, Rose saw no need to correct him.

“Thank you. Having him is a huge help, because I’m not even sure where to

begin deciding on these things.”

“I gave up most of the social obligations required of a nobleman when I became a knight, so our guests will only be relatives and close friends. Don’t think too hard about pleasing anyone but yourself.”

“I’ll do that, then. Have a good day at work.”

Harij came to a complete halt as Rose waved to him. He turned around right as he was about to leave through the front door and looped his arm around Rose’s waist, pulling her close.

“...Don’t you think your fiancé is entitled to a goodbye kiss when you see him off?”

Rose flattened her lips into a straight line. Heat rose to her face as she recalled that morning.

“A-After the wedding ceremony, sure. You said you would wait until after...,” she rasped. She had no idea why waving goodbye struck a chord with him, but Harij’s sexy beast mode had switched back on.

It took being pinned under him earlier for Rose to thoroughly learn just how tempted she was by Harij—and how weak she was to him in all manners. She couldn’t resist him at all.

But being swept away with the mood wouldn’t do either of them any good. Harij groaned before her stubbornness as if he had just swallowed a bag full of sour grapes.

“...You will pay for this later.”

“That is a line typically used by people who work in the underground when they are trying to threaten someone who reneged on payment—it is absolutely not something you should say to your beloved fiancée.”

At least now Harij was no longer trying to steal her lips. He gently lifted her hand and slowly intertwined each of his fingers with hers so their palms were pressed together. Rose’s lips trembled.

“Wh-What are—”

“Anything goes as long as I don’t kiss you on the lips, right?”

He brushed off her hood and dropped his lips to the top of her head. Meanwhile, his thumb massaged ticklish circles into her palm. Unable to resist the enjoyable sensation, she called his name.

“Sir Harij!”

“What?”

“Your hand is—”

“Only holding yours. That’s normal.”

It is? Does the rest of the world consider this kind of touch normal? As Rose mulled over his comment, Safina came back inside to check on what was keeping Harij.

Seeing his master in an embrace with his lover, the experienced butler withdrew to stand beside the door, his expression perfectly composed.

This butler is too skilled at reading the mood! He never interrupts when I need him to!

“S-Sir Harij!”

“Not ready to stop yet.”

“Not that! Mr. Safina just... Mr. Safina just wa—”

“You just think you saw him.”

As if! Rose had clearly seen him enter the room with her own two eyes.

Harij finally relented and freed her from his embrace after she started smacking him on the back.

“Then how about you send me off with words instead of a kiss? What loving words do you have for your fiancé?”

I forgot how much of a piece of slug poop this man can be.

Rose gnashed her teeth loud enough to hear them chatter as she glared up at Harij. He didn’t seem the least bit terrified of her angry face.

“You don’t know what to say? Then I’ll just have to teach you.”

Not wanting to lose, Rose uttered a single letter. “I...”

“...I?”

“I eagerly await your quick return,” she managed to sputter as she pulled her hood down past her chin. The next second, she was caught within his strong arms again.

Apparently, that was the correct answer. Rose buried her face in his chest and inhaled that scent of his that she loved so much.

I'll stay up late to welcome him back home tonight, she thought as she rubbed her forehead against his chest.

Rose returned to the parlor where Tien was waiting only after she couldn't see Harij riding off to work on his horse anymore.

“Welcome back. Your newlywed life seems to be more enjoyable than I expected—what a relief.”

“We aren't newlyweds yet.”

“Hahaha.”

Tien looked as if he had more to say, but Rose's scrunched-up nose stopped him. Mona stood beside the open door in Safina's absence.

“You must be getting tired. Let's take a break.”

“Tien... I've changed my mind about you—you're the greatest right now.”

Tien was an angel for suggesting a break just as she was burning out from using her brain for things she usually didn't think about.

Mona immediately reacted to the word *break* and prepared them tea. She also brought out the apple muffins Tien must have given her beforehand.

Rose thought the muffin would crumble in her mouth, but her teeth were met with a spongy texture. The more she chewed it, the chewier it became, fascinating her with its sponginess. She ripped off a piece with her fingers, and it pulled cleanly away.

She stared at the broken-off portion and gulped—it looked so inviting.

For a long moment, she debated whether to start from the tiny piece or to just sink her teeth right into the muffin. This was a divine dilemma to have.

Honeyed, golden apple slices poked out. Their tenderness was evident from a mere glance.

After a moment's hesitation, Rose sank her teeth into the muffin. This time, she could feel the tenderness of the fruit. Sponginess and tenderness waged war in her mouth, satisfying her teeth with a texture bomb. The smell of butter and the sweet-and-sour apple on her tongue sent Rose to heaven and back.

"Since when did you become so fond of sweets?" Tien asked, surprised after watching her reaction with fascination.

Cheeks stuffed like a squirrel, she contemplated his inquiry.

Her interest in sweets—or rather, food—developed during her interactions with Harij. His visits delighted her. Eating sweets also delighted her.

The two became synergetic, granting Rose excessive amounts of joy.

"Since it makes you so happy, I'll come with more next time."

Until now, her life as a witch had been devoid of joy. She would get up in the morning, take care of the fields, go into the woods, gather ingredients, make her secret potions—basically, instead of living, she was just existing. She did what she *needed* to do, and that was basically it.

Because that was how she had been taught to live—because that was how the life of a witch should be, as far as she knew. To Rose, that was what it meant to be the Good Witch.

Tien seemed very fond of Harij for changing her outlook on life. His foxlike eyes twinkled.

Rose made short work of the muffin and savored the crumbs left on her fingers.

"I didn't expect you to eat so many, but it's reassuring seeing you with a hearty appetite. Glad I didn't have to force them down your throat," Tien commented, sounding relieved after watching Rose voraciously devour the treats.

It was such a drastic shift in tone, Rose felt inclined to ask, "What are you talking about?"

“Some of my customers have collapsed recently.”

“Illness? Poison?”

“It doesn’t seem to be anything extreme like that. It always happens suddenly, when everyone is drinking wine or relaxing. The oddest part: once the doctor rushes in, the symptoms have already taken care of themselves.”

“Heh.”

Many of Tien’s customers stood in positions of power and had the ability to change the very fate of this kingdom.

A hand reached out beside Rose while she was listening. Mona was trying to clear away the empty plates. Rose turned to the side to stay out of her way. Mona bowed her head, her face stark white, and hurried out of the room with the gathered dishes.

“She seems awfully terrified of you.”

“It’s rare for someone not to be scared of a witch—although she appeared more skittish than usual. Maybe she thought a witch and merchant were scheming how to destroy her country together?” Rose suggested with a light shrug, snatching up another muffin off the table.

“Maybe the sudden heatwave is getting to people.”

“People don’t rot in the heat like apples do.”

“It’s common sense in the southern nations not to stay out in the sun too long.”

Rose’s eyes sparkled with this new tidbit. As she was someone who never left home, Tien had been her constant source of information. He always brought her a new stack of books whenever he returned from a long journey peddling his wares.

“What are the symptoms—”

“Okay.” Tien flashed a foxlike smile. Rose shuddered. “Time to get back to work—we can return to this topic after we decide on your dress.”

Trembling, Rose mumbled, “Uh-huh.”

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A month had passed since Tien came with a store's worth of items to show them.

As it turned out, the dress, the veil, the shoes, and the jewelry were all decided that day. He was the most annoying man whenever he acted the part of her older brother, but she could depend on him when it came to his trade.

The wonderful thing about him was that, despite his numerous suggestions, Rose was always the one with the final say. She was left feeling satisfied with every choice, while her selected items had far better taste than if she had gone at it alone.

Measurements had already been taken, and the dress was coming together without a hitch.

After thoroughly learning about what a wedding entailed, Rose realized she would be more pitiful by the end of winter than a sheep being auctioned off. It was like a bad joke for a scrawny witch to receive God's blessing for her marriage before the people while dressed in a noblewoman's finery.

But it wasn't all bad—she would get to see Harij in his full knight's attire in return. She was beside herself with excitement for that day to come.

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THE mailbox closed with a bang. Rose locked it with the key hanging from her neck and rowed the boat to the hermitage. She fiddled the door open while staring at the letter she had retrieved.

"...L?"

The sender's name consisted of a single initial. That wasn't all too strange for a letter sent by a client—only a fool would write their full name on correspondence meant for a witch.

Rose kicked the door shut behind her, ladylike manners be damned, and sliced open the letter. The envelope was far too cute to be used for requesting a witch's services. A sweet and flowery fragrance wafted from the envelope, which had finely detailed notches added to look like the edges were trimmed

with lace, and dainty flowers had been painted on the stationery. The colorfully detailed flowers were all types that bloomed in the summer. They were not the wildflowers found growing deep in the forest, but rather the fragile blooms grown in a nobleman's garden under the tender love and care of a gardener.

What kind of crazy person would spray perfume on a letter addressed to a witch using such expensive and high-quality stationery?

Disturbed, Rose removed the paper from the envelope, her jaw dropping as she began reading the letter.

Dear Noble Witch of the Lake,

The flowers coloring the garden are swaying in the slight breeze. How have you been these fine days, Beautiful Witch of the Lake?

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your tremendous help the other day. Please forgive me for thanking you not in person, but through letter instead. Due to unforeseeable circumstances, I had no choice but to refrain from visiting you. I will come again at a later date to greet you—I promise it.

I cannot thank the Goddess enough for our chance encounter, though it involved meeting you when I was not at my best. Every time I catch a glimpse of the clear moon, my thoughts return to that day when I met the beautiful and graceful Witch for the first time, and my chest burns with longing all night long. Our encounter was the most joyous, wonderful, and fantastic moment of my life. Every time I close my eyes, I vividly recall your awe-inspiring presence and refined bearing.

If you are the brilliantly shining moon, then I wish to become the star that glows beside you. Nothing would make me happier than for that to come to be.

You are the radiance that illuminates the everlasting darkness, the heavenly umbrella that blocks the rain and the wind, the undulating sea of benevolence, the mellow spring ice—

Eyes rolling, Rose quietly folded the letter up. Five more pages of poetic language unlike anything that had ever been sent to witch's hermitage continued after that.

For some reason, it brought to mind a dreadful illness coined “*chuunibyou*” in

a faraway land. The symptoms were: suddenly having multiple personalities, left hand tingling, the growth of a third leg—it was said to be a terrible disease that only a handful of children of a certain age suffer.

“...It must be that girl.”

At least she knew the sender’s identity—no question, it was the muddy girl who had fallen into the pit the other day.

She unfolded the letter once more and quickly scanned her eyes over it. Once she confirmed it wasn’t a request letter, she slid it between some books on her shelf.

Interlude: The Place Where the Witch's Soul Rests

ONE morning, Rose woke up after the sun rose.

She rolled out of bed and slid open the curtains. The bright sunlight shone into the room, casting a window-shaped shadow onto the rug.

"...I overslept."

As a shut-in who took pride in living a reasonably regular schedule, Rose had never goofed like this before. Now guilt over failing to tend to her grandmother's garden that morning, and sheer horror at the realization she might become incapable of living alone again, sent Rose into a mighty panic. She flew out of her room in her nightie and bumped into something hard.

"Oomph!"

"Kya...!"

She had collided with Mona, who had been standing outside her room. Shock colored the maid's face. Rose felt the impatient flame burning under her feet sputter out when she saw her tight cheeks and clenched jaw.

"M-Milady. I came to check on you since you didn't come down at the usual time..."

"I feel just fine. Anyway, I must hurry to the hermitage—"

"You needn't worry about that. His Lordship sent someone to tend to it already."

Upon entering Rose's room, Mona promptly set about her work. She prepared a cup of iced tea using the tea set on the cart in the hallway. While Rose moistened her dry morning throat, Mona tidied up her messy bed and tried to select a dress for her from the closet.

"Is there a particular dress you feel like wearing today?"

A dress she felt like wearing? She never picked out her clothes based on

feelings. Ever since Tala told her wearing the same outfit every day would damage the material, she randomly selected whatever she hadn't worn the previous day.

Not only was Mona skilled at her job, but she even asked Rose questions about things she had never conceived of before, so she had clearly served a proper noblewoman at some point. No doubt she was inwardly displeased to now have to serve a gloomy witch. As Rose remained silent on the matter, Mona picked out her clothes.

"Then how about going with this beige dress for today? There just so happens to be a matching ribbon for your hair..."

"What need is there for a ribbon?"

"Do you dislike ribbons?"

That was a difficult question to answer. Rose didn't have enough experience with ribbons to strongly reject them. Besides, she knew in a hidden corner of her heart that she wanted to try wearing one just as much as she felt embarrassed about making herself look pretty when she was a witch.

Unfortunately, Mona took Rose's prolonged silence to mean she had offended her. She was visibly flustered.

"To tell you the truth, Ms. Tala actually instructed me to help you dress up if you aren't feeling under the weather, milady."

"Why?"

"It seems His Lordship canceled the order out of concern for your health, but yesterday...he requested a lunch for two be made for today."

"...Lunch for two?"

"Yes, milady." Mona glanced at Rose to see her reaction before finally working up the nerve to just come out and say it. "...His Lordship has been awfully giddy since yesterday..."

"Giddy?"

"Restless, too..."

“Restless...”

“...Ms. Tala suggested he is attempting to ask milady out on a date.”

Rose fell silent once again, her expression flat. Mona searched her face. Muttering “Mm” and “Ngh” under her breath, Rose sat at her dresser.

“...I leave it to your capable hands.”

“Th-Thank you!”

Mona nervously held the comb against Rose’s hair. One whole season had come and gone since both girls had arrived at the mansion together, but not once had Rose allowed Mona to touch her. She had no need for her assistance, and she also thought the other girl wouldn’t want to touch the scary witch’s body.

Mona began braiding Rose’s light-pink hair, weaving in the beige ribbon in the process. Rose was afraid she looked funny, but she didn’t tell her to stop.

Rose was a witch. Witches couldn’t tell a lie. Thus, Rose could only hold her silence. It was unpleasant to have a bunch of strangers think she was a witch trying to up her sex appeal, but Harij definitely wouldn’t see her that way.

It was a curious feeling having her hair taut against her head, but it stopped bothering her by the time she changed. Maybe she was overly self-conscious, but she thought she looked pretty much like an ordinary city girl when she stood before the mirror.

The low-key beige dress brought out the glossy charm of her dry, light-pink hair.

“My back feels exposed...”

“It is summer after all.”

“You expose it for summer...?”

“Yes, for summer.”

She hadn’t worn revealing clothes any other summer she had lived through, but apparently, exposure was in for the warm season.

“...It suits you very well,” Mona said with diffidence. Through the mirror, Rose

looked at Mona standing behind her.

“...Thank you.”

Rose blamed the new dress for the ticklish feeling and returned her gaze to herself in the mirror. The fabric fit Rose like a glove. She was terribly dismayed that more than half her back was visible, but if Mona said it suited her, then she had nothing further to say, as she knew zilch about beauty standards. The high neckline helped it look more like day wear than formal wear from the front.

Rose stiffly descended the stairs with her right arm and leg swinging out in unison. All she was doing was wearing the dress someone else picked out for her. All she had done was put a little more effort into her hair. All she did was have a ribbon woven into her hair. All she was doing was wearing a dress without her usual robe on top. And yet, for all those little things, Rose couldn't settle down.

She heard Harij's clear, strong voice out in the hallway. He was probably talking to Safina.

“Good morning.”

It wasn't morning anymore, but she went with that greeting anyway.

Harij's mouth dropped when he looked up at Rose from the papers he had spread out on the dining table. After seeing his stunned face, she seriously wondered for a second if she should have said “Good afternoon” instead. Harij's gaze cruised her figure from head to toe for a long while before he nodded.

“Morn...ing.”

The stupefied look on his face disappointed her. She was disappointed in *herself* for getting her hopes up that he would be pleased. She bowed her head to hide how let down she felt. Then she moved toward her seat when she saw Tala preparing her tea in place of breakfast.

The second she stepped forward, Harij jumped to his feet, not caring that he knocked his papers off the table. He didn't even glance at his chair as it clattered onto the floor behind him. Blanching, Safina crouched to collect the fallen papers.

Harij rushed to Rose's side with wide strides and hurriedly draped the coat he was wearing over her shoulders.

"...Um?"

"You can leave now." Harij directed that missive behind Rose with his arm still around her shoulders. She managed to turn her neck just enough to see the footmen bow and quietly leave the room. Once he confirmed their departure, Harij turned Rose's face back toward him. "What happened to your robe? Are you washing it?"

It sounded as if he was criticizing her for not wearing her robe, which miffed her. Sure, Rose was a witch, but that didn't mean she was obligated to wear a robe twenty-four hours a day.

"I sometimes don't wear a robe when venturing into town."

"Are you going into town today?"

"Aren't we going?"

"What?"

They both tilted their heads, clearly not on the same page.

"I'm so sorry, Young Master. I said something I shouldn't have. I was under the impression you two were going out together today and instructed Mona to help her dress for the occasion." Tala came from the kitchen in a hurry and apologized to Harij.

"I see... How are you feeling?"

"Perfectly fine. I simply overslept."

"Really? That's a first. I was hoping we could go out together if you aren't busy today."

"I can make time." Her current concoctions had reached a stage where she could take a break. "I heard it is to be a date." She gazed into his eyes to make sure he wasn't going to back out.

"...It is."

"Also known as a tryst."

“I know.”

He averted his gaze. Rose shifted until their eyes met again.

“Is there a problem?”

“...No.”

Harij was stroking her hair for some reason. His fingers must have discovered the ribbon woven into it because his touch was even gentler than usual.

“You wore that knowing you would be going out with me... I bought you that outfit.”

He did? Rose was entirely under the impression it was among the items included in Tien’s dowry for her. She took another look at the dress she was wearing. The light material was fit for summer, but it left her back unprotected, and she still felt it should have covered more, especially if she wore it to work.

“I didn’t think it would reveal this much back...,” Harij mumbled, his tone rough like the wreckage of a storm. Even he, a man who handled everything flawlessly, lacked the knowledge needed to pick out women’s clothes.

That attested to Mona’s skill, as she had taken steps to provide Rose with the best date outfit when she didn’t understand how it worked herself. While Rose was busy being grateful to Mona, she was graced by Harij’s dashing smile at point-blank range.

“You look amazing. You’re adorable.”

She feared her eyes might burn if she looked too long. Staring at something too bright and dazzling for long periods of time was said to be bad for the eyes. After basking in his smile, which was brighter than the sun, she covered her eyes with both hands.

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“**IS** this a popular date course for cityfolk these days?”

Rose tilted her head under the sunlight filtering through the thick tree canopy, the shawl covering her shoulders fluttering with the slight movement.

Cool air ran past her, bringing the familiar smells of the forest right to them.

Dirt clung to their shoes, and every time they took a step, they risked stumbling on the roots and tough grass, making this a hard date spot to recommend to anyone unused to gallivanting through forests. By the same token, their destination was as gloomy as they came.

“It’s in this general area.”

Rose had guided Harij to an evergreen oak tree deep within the forest. The giant oak’s leaves and branches had extended so far, they intermingled with the other trees, obscuring its full scale. Its eerily curled branches looked like a witch’s gnarly nails as depicted in stories.

Carrying a bouquet of colorful flowers that clashed horribly with the creepy surroundings, Harij let out a wry laugh.

“There isn’t a grave marker?”

“It’s a deceased body. Mourning for the soul is all that matters. Besides, it is better for everyone if no one knows where a witch has died.”

“I see.”

Harij laid the stunning bouquet at the base of the evergreen oak. Growing uncomfortable, Rose picked a lily of the valley off the ground and placed it beside the bouquet.

Harij proceeded to bow his head and stood there for a while with his eyes closed. With nothing to do, Rose wandered around the tree.

This was where she buried her grandmother five years ago. She visited when she felt like it, but not often. The moment her grandmother had departed the land of the living, she departed the realm of being a witch’s concern.

However, Rose did occasionally visit as a granddaughter. She didn’t want her grandmother’s soul to remain in this plane of existence, but Rose sometimes found herself wandering back to her resting place.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Are you finished?”

“Yeah. I’m glad I got to greet her.”

“Speaking of greetings, is it all right that I haven’t gone to greet your family yet?”

Rose didn’t know much about marriage, but she knew it wasn’t something they could do without permission, given Harij’s noble blood.

“Oh, did I not tell you? My oldest brother has already inherited the title and lives with my parents in Heizlan. Our territory is far from the capital, and I’ve only just taken on a new post, so I can’t take the time to travel. You will meet at the wedding.”

It seemed wedding ceremonies also served as a way to meet everyone for the first time.

“I have another older brother... He lives abroad, but he will come back for our wedding.”

“Then I will greet them all at that time.”

“Yeah, please do... How about we have lunch now?”

“We might inadvertently sit on top of my grandmother if we do it here, so how does eating somewhere else sound?” Rose suggested with cool indifference, earning a mortified nod from Harij.

They opened their lunch basket in an area where there were several freshly cut tree stumps. Tala’s deluxe lunch consisted of sandwiches. There were two types: one with thick bacon and fried eggs sandwiched between thinly sliced baguettes and the other with sweet apple jam.

Just looking at them aroused hunger. Determined to try both, Rose reached for the bacon sandwich first.

“Wait.”

Rose shot Harij an evil look for stopping her. Anyone would think it ridiculous to glare at the person you love most in the world just for preventing you from eating. Rose thought so, too—until three seconds ago.

But after seeing Tala’s delicious lunch, she realized that concept was nothing more than a pretty ideal that held no merit in real life. After all, the sandwiches

Tala whipped up looked so tantalizing.

“Don’t glare at me. If you want it that bad, why not ask her to make lunch for you every day?”

Rose only requested half a roll from Tala for lunch every day. A part of that had to do with her regular eating habits before moving in with Harij, but it was also because she had discovered she didn’t have a huge appetite in the first place.

“I can’t eat that much when I’m alone.”

“I see.”

Harij’s smile was so affectionate as he let out a light chuckle, it made Rose feel as if she had admitted to something embarrassing. She cocked a puzzled eyebrow at him.

“Sit here.”

Harij laid a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket on top of a stump. Rose’s lips turned down at the corners—she just realized he wasn’t trying to get in the way of her and her sandwich. She was ashamed of how petty she had been to glare at him.

“I’m sorry. I thought you were trying to steal the sandwich from me,” Rose muttered as she sat on his handkerchief.

“I would never do that.”

“Why not?”

“There isn’t an idiot in the world who would snatch away something that delights the woman he loves.”

Taking in his words filled Rose with boundless joy. It suddenly clicked into place for her how real this was—each word he uttered and his gentleness toward her.

Heat sprung to her face. Rose’s hand shot up to her forehead, but the hood she reached for wasn’t there. She couldn’t help but wonder why she had removed her greatest armor—the robe.

She quietly reached for the basket, stole a sandwich, and took a big bite. It should be harder to tell the change in her expression if she was munching on something.

Harij followed suit and bit into a sandwich. The sandwiches eaten on the handkerchief Harij had laid out for her tasted extra special.

In the middle of the forest, surrounded by the cries of animals and bugs and a babbling creek, the couple ate with relish.

Chapter 5: The Witch's Hermitage Floating in a Puddle

ROSE carefully removed the mud from the fresh green herbs using lake water. Even in the sweltering heat, the cool lake felt pleasant.

The bright-blue sky reflected on the water's surface. Rose's eyes were drawn to the sky by a peculiar scent carried on the wind. *It might rain today.* Rose shook out the freshly washed herbs, pulled the small boat to shore, and flipped it over.

After entering the hermitage, she worked in silence until she heard the *jing-a-ling* of a bell. The sound informed her that a visitor had arrived at the forest's dock.

She peered stealthily out the small window to find a man she knew well standing outside. It was Harij, who she hadn't seen for a few days. He seemed to have dropped by on his way home from work. He even had a basket with him. Yes, it was *that* basket!

Rose excitedly cleared the table and laid out the tablecloth. She flipped the boat back over and rowed it out to meet him.

"Welcome. Thank you for coming."

"...Sure thing."

When she arrived at the dock, Harij was staring at her, speechless. She tilted her head with the unvoiced question of "What's wrong?" but his eyes remained glued to her face.

She rubbed her cheek with her robe's sleeve, assuming it must've gotten dirty while she was washing the herbs. But there wasn't anything on her sleeve when she checked it.

Harij boarded the boat and cupped Rose's cheek with his hand—it was the opposite cheek from the one she had just wiped.

"Is that the one that's dirty?"

“No...well, yeah. Let’s say it is.”

Another vague answer from him, but Rose let it pass. After all, Harij’s other hand held the basket.

I wonder what sweets he brought me today. She had been treated to delicacies daily since she began staying at the Azm mansion, but she had even greater anticipation for the ones Harij delivered to her personally.

Rose peered up at Harij, and he gazed down at her, the corners of his eyes softening slightly. He seemed to be in a good mood. Work had kept him busy lately, but something good must have happened while he was away. Harij’s happiness was Rose’s happiness.

Once they arrived at the island, Rose assisted the basket—which happened to be carried by Harij—off the boat, escorted the basket to her hermitage, and opened the door so the basket could come inside. Harij followed her, smiling from ear to ear.

Rose planned to ask all about his day over snacks and was about to show him to the chair when she realized there was something she had to do first.

She slinked up to Harij and held out both hands, careful not to let her excitement show.

“What?”

“Thank you for the souvenirs.”

Well, I botched that. She had been trying so hard to control herself, but her lips had quirked up in a goofy grin.

“.....”

Meanwhile, Harij’s good mood took a sudden nosedive. His smile flipped upside down and he sullenly looked at the basket.

“So the basket was why you were so happy to see me?”

“H-Happy? Me? *Never.*”

“I can tell even if it doesn’t show on your face.”

How can that be?! Rose was speechless. Keeping her face devoid of

expression was necessary to protect the secret that witches don't tell lies. Letting her emotions show now that she would be interacting with humans more than ever meant she wouldn't be able to protect that secret any longer.

"I can't believe it... Has it become that easy to read how I'm feeling?"

Rose was in shock that Harij had seen through what she believed was an impenetrable mask. He patted her several times on the head as if she needed that extra consolation.

"Don't worry—you only become that way around me, and I can always back you if you slip up."

That seemed even more embarrassing in its own way, but Rose pretended not to realize it as she quietly bowed her head.

Harij had brought her an apple pie pocket, which consisted of sweet sautéed apples sandwiched between cookie-like rectangular pastries.

The scent of cinnamon permeated the sweet and tart apples. With every bite, the tender fruit delighted her teeth.

The basket smelled of cinnamon, so she left that spice out of the tea she prepared, giving it a different flavor. It married perfectly with the pie pocket's sweetness, doubling how delicious everything tasted together.

They ate the pastries in their usual seats. How strange for it to have become only natural for her to enjoy a peaceful snack in the witch's hermitage with Harij. You never know what life has in store for you.

"What have you been up to lately?"

It had been four days since they last saw each other and even longer since they had the chance to sit and have a relaxing chat. Rose swallowed her mouthful of pie before answering.

"The other day, Tien brought wedding shoes for me to try on. Every single pair had stupidly high heels. He made me try on dozens, saying I need to increase my height if I want to look good standing next to you..."

She could never speak of the confidential information pertaining to Tien as her client, but she could talk about him as a friend. Plus, she was just so happy

to have something to share with Harij that concerned him, too, she became all the more talkative.

“I think I ended up trying over twenty pairs before Tien gave the okay. By the end, I didn’t have the strength to move, so Mr. Safina lifted my feet and changed my shoes for me.”

Rose continued talking without realizing Harij’s temples were twitching.

“And one of the footmen, I forget which one”—the Azm mansion employed two footmen, but Rose could never remember who was who—“lent me his hand because I was so unsteady on the high heels, a newborn goat could walk better than me—”

“I’m sorry, Rose.”

Harij elegantly set down his teacup.

She was just getting to the good part, too! Even though Tien had been a guest, the clincher was that he ended up getting a scolding lecture from Ms. Tala for bossing Rose around until she nearly tripped and fell into the wall. Harij directed a pointed look at Rose, who was on pins and needles with anticipation to tell him that last bit.

“I forgot to tell you: I don’t want to hear you talk about other men today.”

“...Oh? Okay. Shall I tell you the rest tomorrow?”

“I don’t want to hear it tomorrow or the day after.”

Then when am I supposed to finish my story? Rose tossed a piece of pie into her mouth. As she savored the taste, her cheeks turned redder than an apple.

Oh yeah, this man is in love with me.

She occasionally—or rather, quite often—forgot that. It didn’t help that she also didn’t know what topics were off-limits between couples.

Furthermore, there were probably things that were okay or no good for others that did and didn’t work for both of them and vice versa. This was one thing they would have to discuss and learn about each other as a couple.

Harij was very interested in learning about what kind of life Rose was living at

the Azm mansion. He spared no effort in making sure it was peaceful—of that, she was sure.

Nevertheless, he likely didn't enjoy imagining her getting along well with other men in his absence.

"Okay... Let me see, oh yes, a fawn was born in the forest. As I was watching, the mother brought her face near the amniotic sac and..."

She had picked the topic at random, but Harij happily listened to this story without a word of complaint.

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ONCE they finished eating, Rose left her seat to wash the dishes. She needed to do that right after eating since she spent her nights at the Azm mansion. She couldn't be as lazy as before.

"Phew. That should do it."

Rose turned around after scrubbing the dishes so thoroughly that not even Harij could complain—and was met by a surprising sight.

"...Are you sleeping?"

She thought he was awfully quiet, but she never imagined it was because he'd fallen asleep. She tiptoed over to him just in case and stole a peek at his face.

"...He's asleep."

What skill he had to fall asleep sitting perfectly upright in the kitchen chair. Maybe his crossed arms were what kept him balanced, because he looked as stable as if he were awake. His expression was far from peaceful. He must have been tired, to look tense even in his sleep.

Crouching, Rose propped her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her hands. She studied every facet of Harij's face, beautiful as it was even when taut and asleep.

Harij continually took extra steps to ensure Rose was adapting to life at the mansion even though he had recently been reassigned to a new post. He also had his hands full running around preparing everything for the wedding, which Rose had no interest in dabbling in.

The opportunities for them to eat together had been steadily decreasing, showing just how incredibly busy Harij was these days. He might have been pushing the limit coming home as often as he did in the beginning to make sure she settled in all right.

Today over the pie pockets, he'd told her he was finally able to get some time off. His break would be short-lived, though, because he needed to return to the palace just past noon tomorrow.

If he was going to rest here anyway, she wished he would do it in bed, but Rose was incapable of carrying Harij without assistance. She couldn't possibly roll him onto the floor and heave him onto the bed like a log. And if she happened to wake him, he definitely wouldn't consider going back to sleep.

Rose was surprised that instead of worrying that she would have to touch Harij, she was more worried about him. She had grown exceptionally accustomed to being with him.

"...Goodnight," she whispered, sitting with her back leaning against the leg of Harij's chair. She reached for one of the books littering the messy floor and softly opened it on her lap.

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RAIN pelted the lake. Torrential rain shook the flowers and bounced off the ground. The witch's hermitage seemed to be floating on top of a giant puddle.

The crisp sound of flipping paper echoed loudly through the chilly air. Rose was reading a book she had propped up against her knees. Her nose was close enough to brush against the pages. She wouldn't have been able to read the letters if she didn't hold it that close because the room had darkened.

"...Rose?"

She thought she heard someone say her name. Drawn by that muffled sound, she lifted her face from the book.

Her gaze wandered the room until it locked with dazed eyes. The sole pop of light in the dim room, Harij, stared at her from the chair.

"It seems I fell asleep."

“I’m sorry. I planned to wake you before it got this dark...”

“Nah. Sorry I fell asleep on you.”

Rose glanced out the window and was astonished to see the rain coming down hard enough to classify as a storm. She had been too engrossed in her book to notice.

“...It’s raining.”

“We can’t use the boat in this weather. Let’s wait until it lets up.”

It was very dark out with the rain clouds blotting out the sky. From the look of things, it was near nighttime. The hermitage didn’t have grand clocks like the Azm mansion, so Rose couldn’t tell the exact hour.

Luckily, there was no carriage to pick them up today, since Harij had refused it. Otherwise, the coachman would also be trapped in the rain waiting for them.

The rain pounded against the thin roof, which could have easily blown away in the storm. It sounded strangely more violent than she had ever heard it before.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the lake turned into the sea...”

“Lakes cannot become the sea.”

“I know that.”

Rose lit a lamp and rummaged through the kitchen. Unfortunately, they were in the height of summer, and she had spared herself the trouble of buying things she wouldn’t normally need until winter. Unsurprisingly, there wasn’t a crumb of food anywhere in the house.

The rain wouldn’t be stopping anytime soon. If she had known this was going to happen, she would have left half the apple pie pockets in reserve for later. Rose wasn’t hungry, but she’d feel terrible if Harij was.

Come to think of it, she had received an unopened bottle of brandy from a client a while back. As she groped around the shelves for the brandy, the letter from L fell out. She picked up the letter she had randomly stuffed into the shelves and shoved it into another random spot. This was why her place was never clean.

She managed to find the brandy and dusted the cork off with her robe. She turned to Harij, holding the lamp up to the bottle's label.

"Want some?"

"Sure."

Rose poured the brandy into plain cups meant for everyday use and placed them on the table. It couldn't be helped that she didn't have fancy glasses or a comfy sofa. Not only was the hermitage small and cluttered, but the bed was the only other place to sit.

"It doesn't look like it will let up anytime soon."

"No, it doesn't."

Rose was starting to get anxious. Sure, she had to worry about leaks and the house being blown off the island with them in it, but her greatest concern lay with the rain physically preventing them from returning to the Azm mansion. If this downpour kept up, she and Harij would end up spending the night together in this confined space.

They had seen through the night in this hermitage together once before. Harij was a perfect gentleman then. Their relationship had been that of a suspicious witch and noble knight. But what about now? Harij no longer hesitated to touch Rose, and she also didn't mind—

"Uuuuummmm!"

"What's wrong?"

"I felt it necessary to do research because of my ignorance—marriage research, that is."

I need a distraction! Rose slammed her cup of brandy on the table, walked over to the spot where she had piled up her recently purchased books, and returned with three of them.

"Marriage in this country is the legal union of two consenting people who swear an oath to each other in God's name. A married couple consists of two people who are socially and economically united, and husband and wife each have their own obligations and rights... Does that sound right?"

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it.”

Rose thought back to what Harij once tried to tell her: *“The only unchanging promise I can give you is marriage.”*

At the time, she was too much of a nervous wreck to really think about what he meant, and she also didn’t have adequate knowledge about marriage to get what the big deal was, but now she did.

The page Rose had opened the book to addressed bereavement as well. When she saw it for the first time, she was so surprised, she had to reread the same paragraph several times.

According to the book, the married status still held even after a spouse was deceased.

Most animals do not remain faithful to their deceased mate. If one of the pair dies, the one left behind will find a new mate and have children. Nothing is dedicated to the corpse—the animals move on.

Yet humans continue to dedicate their futures and responsibilities even in death, maintaining the “marriage” bond.

An unchanging promise really would last forever. He offered her an everlasting oath that wouldn’t change over the years and decades to come—even in the event of his death.

Rose was overcome with joy—an even greater joy than she experienced when he first asked her to marry him.

“...I also learned about how there are different types of marriage: those that are simply bound only by law and those who desire the union. All the married people I have ever known have been morally compromised clients who come seeking the witch’s secret potions despite already having a spouse. So I decided to ask people who aren’t my clients—granted, they all work at your mansion.”

“You can trust them.”

“I believe so, too. Would you like a refill?” Rose asked, noticing Harij’s empty cup.

“Nah, I’m good,” he said with a shake of his head. He would typically drink

another two cup's worth.

"Are you sure?" Rose confirmed before continuing with her story. "So I asked Mona first."

She still hadn't become close to Mona yet, but the young maid no longer cringed when they passed each other in the halls. She hadn't gotten over her innate fear of the witch, but she seemed to be growing more comfortable around her. As evidenced by the fact Mona took Rose's puzzling question seriously and answered despite her initial hesitation.

"She described marriage as 'future stability.'"

"I see."

"I asked Mr. Safina next."

Rose directed a sidelong glance at Harij because he had only just told her *"I don't want to hear you talk about other men today, tomorrow, or the day after."*

He showed no reaction, so she continued, "He said marriage is the 'fertile ground for the seed of love.'"

She also asked the two footmen but couldn't remember what they said, so she left that part out.

"I asked Ms. Tala last. She said marriage means 'continuing to walk life together.'"

"What did you think after hearing everyone's opinions?"

"The answers varied, but none were wrong. It led me to the conclusion every marriage is built differently by the two people involved. That is why..." Rose grabbed the brandy cup and downed the contents. This was something she couldn't say without liquid courage. She stared at the bottom of the cup as she confessed the rest. "I believe that talking about marriage—about life—with you is our own form of being...married."

At some point along the way, Rose and Harij started communicating without being nervous or hesitant about offending or being offended so that they could better understand each other. Rose became confident in her feelings for Harij

and in his feelings for her.

“I see,” he whispered in a voice smoother than warm hot cocoa.

Harij probably helped Rose out in more ways than even she realized.

As someone who had only experienced life in the hermitage, Rose knew little to nothing about the outside world. She had no means to learn more about the kingdom at large, or about things like knights, nobles, and the rest.

It would be impossible to master all that knowledge and assimilate perfectly into his world. Much like how asking Harij to suddenly use magic would be impossible. Nevertheless—

“Please tell me if there is ever anything I should be aware of. I don’t know much about the world or the people in it, but I don’t want to stay ignorant when it comes to you.”

She would never stand in the same position as Harij or hold his exact outlook on life. What she could do, however, was share in his goals, support him, and come to understand why he believed the things he did.

“Even if we have to take different routes to get there, as long as we end up at the same destination, then we will succeed at being married... Or at least, that’s what I took away from it.”

This was the conclusion Rose, who had always gone with the flow and never set down roots, drew after seriously thinking about her future for the first time.

Forever seemed to pass without a response from Harij. The silence was suffocating.

The smell of brandy filled the room. Worried she had derived an entirely different conclusion from what Harij had imagined for their future, Rose looked up from her cup.

Tenderness met her gaze. Harij was looking at Rose as if she were the whole world, as if he didn’t even hear the rain pelting the thin roof.

His expression was full of affection and bottomless love, unlike anything she had ever seen before.

“What’s...the matter?” Her question came out hoarse.

“I was just thinking about how much I want to hug you.”

He always hugs me without asking first, so why is he holding back today? Rose found his comment so curious, she tilted her head.

He must have guessed her unspoken question. Harij’s lips formed a small smile as he shook his head.



“No one else...is here.”

“Indeed.”

“I’m not confident I can leave it at just a hug.”

His eyes gleamed in the lamplight. They blazed like torches. His ultramarine eyes burned with desire, holding her captive in their shimmering depths. It shouldn’t have been possible, but to Rose, it seemed a small fire was kindled there.

“I have never felt this much love before.”

Neither of them had taken the love potion, but she felt the dizzying flames of love coming from him. She struggled to breathe.

“Let’s get married soon,” he whispered in a low, heady voice.

“...Mm-hm.” A second later, she repeated, “Mm-hm.” She couldn’t risk looking at his face a moment longer.

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THE rain stopped late into the night.

No fiacres operated at this hour. As such, they would have to go on foot if they wanted to return to the Azm mansion. They were contemplating whether they should risk walking back through the pitch-black forest right after it rained, when the bell rang.

Safina was waving to them from the forest dock with a large lantern in his opposite hand. He must have been terribly worried about them to come all the way out there to pick them up. The bell probably rang from his knocking the lantern against the metal pole.

Rose and Harij boarded the boat together. Neither of them could sleep a wink after the conversation they had. Sleepy, Rose let out a yawn.

“Tired? You should sleep a bit when we get home.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I might get rest, but you—”

A sleepless night had passed because of her, and he would soon have to go back to work. Her mumbled apology came from a place of concern that he'd have to work again that afternoon.

“Don't worry, I received something a million times better than sleep.”

Harij patted Rose's head as she climbed into the carriage. She decided it best not to think about what he was referring to.

As the carriage began to move, Rose rummaged through her robe.

“I brought a Wake-Me-Up Potion and an Energizing Potion I happened to have recently made at the hermitage. These will be a thousand times more effective than any pharmacist's medicines.”

“Thanks.”

“You can have them on the house.”

Harij happily accepted the potion bottles Rose held out to him. She took a direct hit from his aura of handsomeness and wrenched her neck away from his face.

“You've grown soft, Sir Harij.”

“Soft?” Harij touched his cheeks as though he couldn't believe his ears.

Rose shook her head to let him know she didn't mean it physically. “Your speech and conduct have softened.”

“I haven't changed.”

“You have. In the past, you...acted according to your feelings only.”

You were arrogant and never listened to what other people had to say. Obviously she couldn't be that straightforward with him and went for the indirect approach, but the result was the same. Harij's lips turned down at the edges.

“You're one to talk. You were awful when we first met. Did you forget?”

“Awful how?”

“You deliberately sent me out on fetch quests for one bizarre ingredient at a time—”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Rose cowered in the corner from the dark history she wanted to forget ever happened.

“...What’s with the extreme reaction?”

Harij had no way of knowing she sent him on wild goose chases just to increase their time together. Rose shook her head hard, her hair smacking her in the face with the speed of it.

“Softer, huh? I guess you could say that.”

Harij averted his gaze from his fiancée’s odd behavior and stared out the window. Rose straightened up and joined him in looking outside. Nothing was visible in the lightless nighttime forest, but Harij seemed to see something.

“I do what I believe is right. I was raised to be that way in an environment that expected as much of me. That part of me can’t be changed this late in life. But... I have come to learn that what I deem as right might not be the right thing for you.”

Rose gave a slight nod, prompting him to go on.

“I have the power of a knight, the obligations and status of a man, and the confidence that I’m head over heels in love with you. By my society’s standards, I could force my will on you. As it stands, I had every intention of taking up residence in that hermitage until you agreed to come to my mansion.”

Rose had a hundred different corrections to make to his remarks, but she listened to him with her lips pressed flat together.

“But then I realized I should respect your thoughts and decisions,” Harij murmured, his face twisting with the bitter realization of how foolish he had once been.

“...What made you realize that?”

“You calling me Sir Harij.”

What significance does that have? Rose wondered, her head tilting with her unspoken query.

“If I had ordered you to use my name, you would have stuck to calling me Client or Lord Harij for life.”

Harij’s blissful smile turned Rose’s cheeks red.

“I only did it because the cityfolk called you Sir Harij... I was just imitating them...”

“Is that so? Well, even if you were to call me Lord, You, or Mister—I would still be happy. Because in the end, it’s something you decided to do for my sake.”

“...I see.”

What a killer line! Where does he learn these things?! Rose balled her fists and looked down. She’d be done for if she accidentally saw his face right now.

“And I also realized that you, too...have your own manner of thinking and living. I was an arrogant fool. I know. I got this stupid notion it was my duty to guide and protect you because I’m a man and more familiar with the ways of the world. And I thought it only natural to make you endure some things you might not like to make that happen... But today, after hearing you talk, I was relieved from the bottom of my heart that I didn’t follow through with any of those dumb notions. I also...want to walk toward the same destination with you, even if we have to take different routes to get there. That’s the kind of marriage I want with you.”

Rose understood how much he cared for her, however poorly he worded it.

Harij’s eyes sparkled as if they had gathered all the light given off by the carriage’s small lantern within them. The eyes she was staring into softened at the corners. Unable to control herself, Rose pinched and pulled both cheeks as far as she could.

“...What are you doing?”

“I figured if they’re going to burst open at the seams anyway, I might as well pull them apart with my own two hands...”

“Huh?”

“Your face, it’s your face...”

“Oh, come on. You really think now’s the time for—”

“You don’t get it, Sir Harij. You don’t understand the destructive power of your magnificent face during times such as this. I am of the right mind in this matter. Your face’s brilliance is just—”

“Yeah, all right. I get it. I do. I understand just how much you’re in love with my face.”

Rose couldn’t argue with that statement. She clenched her teeth, as she was incapable of refuting the undeniable truth he tossed at her.

“You dried slug turd...!”

“It’s indisputable, isn’t it?”

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t lie. She trembled from head to toe.

“You giant pile of dried sea slug turd!”

Harij remained unfazed in the face of Rose’s angry outburst. He leaned against the carriage wall with a pensive look until he seemed to strike upon a genius thought and sat upright.

“...I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“Rose, after all is said and done, you’re just embarrassed because you haven’t gotten used to my face yet, right?”

“Excuse me?”

I’m not embarrassed. I’m absolutely, positively not acting out of embarrassment. But Rose couldn’t say that out loud.

Perhaps his standards were skewed because he was born with such a beautiful visage. No matter how much she saw his face and tried to resist, she would surely continue to melt into a puddle every time he smiled in front of her. This man didn’t have the slightest clue about her plight.

“In that case, you can stare at my face up close to your heart’s content. Why don’t we start right now? You can get your fill until we get back home.”

“Huh?”

“Come here,” Harij beckoned, patting his lap invitingly. Rose was lost for words.

For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out this man’s sensibilities. His suggestion was as wicked as if he had shoved a whole roast goose in the mouth of someone who had just said they were too full to eat.

“I absolutely cannot.”

“Why not? Children do it all the time. You know, that game where you stare at each other until someone cracks first and starts to laugh.”

“I don’t know anything about the divine games good-looking people play, and I definitely can’t do it with you, Sir Harij.”

“Ro—”

“Not happening in a million years.”

“...Don’t keep rejecting me like that.” Harij sank back against the carriage wall after being declined for the third time. “My niece often makes me play it with her.”

“Your niece does?”

“Yeah. She lives back in our domain with my brother and parents. Heizlan is known for its breathtaking scenery and boundless nature, so...she turned out to be more of a little explorer than a proper young lady.”

“She sounds like my kind of girl.”

“Yeah, she’s a good kid. I guess it’s been five years since I last saw her...”

Five years struck a chord with Rose for various reasons. For one, her grandmother had died five years ago. Rose had been frazzled and overwhelmed just trying to figure out how to get by. And that was the state she was in when she fell in love.

Staring at the man who had been the object of her affections for all those years caused her to mutter without thinking.

“...Five years ago I never thought my love would come true someday.”

“...You were in love with someone back then?”

Shoot! I picked the wrong topic. Rose's mouth hung open as she turned red up to her forehead.

"Please disregard what I just said. I need you to forget about it. Please." She pressed her hands together in entreaty, but Harij was scowling.

"...I make it a rule not to get hung up on the past, but..."

"...But?"

"Make sure you never tell me who it is if you ever happen to run into the guy you loved again. Got it?" Harij insisted, his miserable expression revealing days of exhaustion slamming down on him at once.

"....."

Rose sealed her lips when she realized the misunderstanding. His scowl deepened when he saw her alarmed expression. Reading her face sent his instincts working in ways she didn't need them to.

"Please don't tell me it's someone I know."

"...Sadly, yes."

"....."

"....."

Heavy silence enshrouded the carriage. Rose kept her lips sealed per his request that she never tell him who it was.

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JUST studying a little didn't bring Rose any closer to being an expert on human nature.

Harij still told Rose everything about the wedding decisions he made, despite her saying she trusted him to handle it. Apparently, five days after the coldest winter day, when the bells tolled noon, their wedding ceremony would be held in a cathedral with beautiful stained glass.

Of course, the attendees were mostly Harij's acquaintances and were pared down to the bare minimum of seventy-four. A total of seventy-five people would be attending, including Tien.

Preparations for the dress and shoes to be worn at the ceremony were also progressing smoothly. Every time she attended a fitting, she couldn't help but wonder: *Can I wear such a thing and move? But her worries were unfounded, as she discovered each time that she could indeed still move, which she could only chalk up to the seamstress's divine skills.*

Rose leisurely waited for that day to come now that her fears regarding marriage had been assuaged—or she had been, until a lettuce-colored letter knocked her into a state of confusion.

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THE sun took longer to rise with every passing day. Orange clouds trailed across the purple sky, gradually turning yellow as they went.

Rose pulled her hood down low and tied her bootlaces more carefully than usual before plunging into the forest.

She heard a swallow-tailed kite give a loud, squeaky whistle overhead, signaling it found a potential meal. Using a branch she found along the way as a walking stick, she climbed the slopes while occasionally placing her hand on the ground to keep her balance. The sound of leaves crunching underfoot echoed through the woods.

Rose crouched once she arrived at her destination. Moving aside the leaves piled on top of the tree roots would reveal the mushrooms she sought. She picked the exact amount she needed for her potions, placed them with their gills facing down in the basket she held under her arm, and trekked back to the hermitage.

The bell rang, announcing a visitor while she was hanging the mushrooms from the eaves. She made her way around the hermitage and saw that someone had just left a letter for her in the mailbox on the forest's dock.

Rose hadn't noticed how dark it had gotten until then. It was almost time for her to go back to the mansion. She finished hanging the rest of the mushrooms, locked up shop, and crossed the lake. She pulled the small boat ashore with her slender arms and hid it in the brush.

Then she opened the mailbox and removed its contents. There were two

letters inside.

“...Again?”

Her cheeks twitched after seeing the all-too-familiar *L* scrawled on fancy stationery. The girl's letters frequently came, despite her never receiving a response from Rose.

At first, Rose thought the letters were harassment for refusing to take her on as an apprentice, but every page was filled with how much the girl adored witches. There wasn't a single threatening sentence contained within. She didn't sense any curses or magic from them, either, so Rose opted to ignore them, as they were essentially harmless. Not that she could send a letter asking the person to stop even if she wanted to when she didn't know the sender's name or address.

The second letter was contained within a lettuce-colored envelope. The beautiful handwriting was not the work of a ghostwriter but the sender herself—Billaura.

Billaura was the princess of Marjan who had married into another royal family. She was also a client who had once ordered a secret potion from the Good Witch of the Lake.

If not for her request, Rose most likely wouldn't be getting married to Harij, her former one-sided crush. Heck, she probably would have never even spoken to him. Hearing Billaura praise her potions as her greatest hope had also given Rose immense pride and joy.

Thankfully, their friendship continued through letter exchange. Until Billaura, Rose had no reason to communicate by letter with any women her age, so her heart was always aflutter with excitement whenever she sliced open the seal. Needless to say, there was a world of difference between her reaction to this letter and those horrifying love letters from *L*.

Rose picked a flower growing nearby as she read Billaura's letter. The several bell-shaped blossoms swayed as she twirled the stem in her fingers.

But her hand stopped as she read further. The flower she had been playing with fell to the ground.

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“M-M-MS. T-T-T-Ta-Tala!”

“Oh dear. Since when did my name become so long and chipper?”

Rose headed straight for the kitchen after storming into the mansion. Tala welcomed her with a smile as she cooked.

“Ms. Tala!”

“Yes? What is it, milady?”

Rose squeezed the letter inside her robe as she relayed the shocking details contained within. She had brought it to Tala hoping the older woman would tell her it was all a lie or some kind of joke, but her hopes were dashed by her quick affirmation.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Shocked, Rose swayed on her feet. Tala tried to help her, spatula in hand, but Rose refused and staggered off into the hallway.

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“M-MONA!”

Mona’s slender shoulders lurched as she was in the middle of changing out the candles. She nervously turned around as if she feared she had incited the Witch’s wrath.

“Y-Yes? I-Is something the matter?” Mona asked, her face grim with worry that she was about to be scolded for some sort of misconduct. Rose hated to ruin the progress they had recently made in their relationship by asking this, but she couldn’t stop herself.

“I need to ask you something.”

“What is it?” Mona held her shoulders back and her head high as if preparing for the dressing-down to come.

Rose swallowed hard, then asked Mona the same question she inquired of Tala.

Mona blinked several times as if she didn’t comprehend the question at first

before she nodded. “Y-Yes, it’s true.”

“It’s true...isn’t it? That’s how it normally works...”

Though she half expected that answer, it inflicted immeasurable damage on Rose’s psyche.

“...Um, milady?”

“...No, it’s fine... Thank you...for...telling me...”

“Don’t thank me... Um, milady... O-Oh, do be careful!” Mona pleaded from behind as Rose stumbled off.

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“MR. Safina...”

Rose appeared like a ghost. Safina jumped with a start from where he was working in Harij’s bedroom.

“...Is that you, milady? Is something troubling you?”

“Do you have a minute? I wanted to ask you something.”

“I always have time for you. What is it you wish to ask?” Safina escorted Rose to sit on the sofa in Harij’s room and then ordered the footman in attendance to bring a warm cup of tea.

Rose wet her parched throat with the drink. Then she buried her face in her hands.

“Ms. Tala and Mona both tell me it’s true... But I’m having a hard time believing it... It just sounds so crazy to me...,” she rasped, on the verge of tears. Safina gently rubbed her back.

“I see. What happened?”

“You see...there’s a client...an acquaintance I exchange letters with.”

“A friend of yours, then.”

“I’m not sure if it’s all right to call her that. But anyway, she...” Rose finally burst into tears. She recalled the shocking passage from Billaura’s letter.

"I regrettably can't attend the ceremony because it lands during the final month of my pregnancy, but I hope it will be the happiest of days for you. Just let Harij show you the way if you don't know how to do the kiss that seals the marriage."

"Sh-She said y-you have to kiss at the end of the ceremony..."

"You do."

"Hyaaaaah!"

Rose hopped a whole apple's height off the sofa—she was that surprised. Face redder than a cherry, she turned with teary eyes toward the speaker and found Harij standing behind her.

"Wh-Wh-Why a-are y-y-youuu h-here?!"

"Why wouldn't I be? This is my room."

Rose pressed her lips into a flat line—she couldn't argue with that.

"You haven't been around lately, so I thought you would be out today, too."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I was looking for some files in the other room."

After hearing the source of Rose's concern, Safina seemed to determine the problem would be better solved by Harij, and he left the room with a gentle smile.

All that was left was a hot pot of tea, Rose, and Harij.

"Didn't you say you looked into a bunch of books on marriage? None of them said anything about this?"

"It only talked about exchanging vows. I n-n-never imagined human vows required ph-physical t-touch of that sort."

"It's not that big of a deal. Your lips only have to briefly touch."

"B-Briefly touch?!"

Did briefly touching lips not count as a kiss? Wasn't that the pure definition of kissing? Rose's mouth flapped open and closed, but she failed to voice the question.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be gentle.”

“You’ll be *gentle*?!” Rose cried, half-hysterical. “Does that mean there are other ways to do it aside from *gentle*?!”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?! Why did you go quiet?! Is there a need to stay silent?!” Groaning, Rose pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face in them. “I can’t... My first kiss...during the ceremony, in front of others... I just can’t...”

Seeing Rose trembling and grumbling elicited Harij’s sympathy, and he began tenderly rubbing her back.

“Would you rather practice first?”

“I strongly recommend you don’t tease me right now.”

“...Well, I won’t force you. We can arrange the ceremony to proceed without —”

“Really?!” Rose unfurled herself and instantly perked up like a dog hearing his master pull out the food bowl. Harij glared at her through narrowed eyes.

“...Rose.”

“B-But you just said it can be done... You said it, not me! You did!”

Rose jumped to her feet and fled the room before he could take it back. But then a critical point dawned on her and she poked her head around the door.

“...By the way...”

“What?”

“Do you remember our promise?”

“What promise?”

Rose’s face soured with annoyance at the man who acted as if he had forgotten the vow he made to her.

“What you promised me in return for wearing a wedding dress.”

“Yeah, I remember, but why would you mention that now? Don’t you think

it's a bit abrupt and rude?"

"I can't say that I don't, but it's more important that you wear it."

Rose brought it up because she worried he might take back his promise to wear his knight attire in return for making concessions over the wedding kiss.

"I have been waiting for the longest time. When will you wear it for me?"

Rose had recently started welcoming Harij home from work at the door every night. She did it partly because he had been coming home less often these days, but the biggest reason was that she hoped he might return in his work clothes. Unfortunately, he showed no inclination of doing so in the near future.

"Can't you at least tell me when you will wear it for me?"

"...No."

"Why not?!"

"I'll wear it when the time is right."

"When the time is *right*? You mean while you're on duty at the palace? Then I will never get to see it for the rest of my life! Do you plan to leave me hanging forever?!"

When she considered he might not keep his promise to her, Rose rapidly grew sad and let anger slip into her voice.

"Does it mean that much to you?"

"It does..."

She nearly forgot how to behave like a witch. Rose took a deep, steadying breath and directed a pointed look at him.

"Are you going to break our promise?"

"I won't. I'll keep it." Harij answered with a serious face and tone.

Mind a little more at ease, her gaze softened.

"I trust you."

He made a sound like a half-suppressed laugh, and his expression became so sweet, she thought she might melt right there.

“...That’s good.”

“!!”

Rose was so thunderstruck by him, she ran down the hallway before the sweetness made her cease to be.

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A man sat alone in the dark office into the wee hours of the morning. The open curtains welcomed a moonlit night into the room.

The strong winds drowned out the droning of bugs that always seemed to be competing to see who could chirp the loudest. Wispy clouds hugged the moon and reflected its white light. Asleep under the starry dome, the palace was silent for all but the occasional gust of wind blowing by. A pen could be heard scratching across paper in the office used for state affairs.

The sound of footsteps coming down the hall faintly reached the office. With his back bathed in moonlight, the man glaring down at the documents illuminated by nothing more than a small lamp suddenly lifted his head.

“Did you figure anything out?”

Yašm glanced from his moonlit spot toward the door, which opened without a knock. Harij poked his exhausted face into the room.

“I apologize for coming this late at night.”

“I don’t mind. Sit down.” Yašm set down his pen and massaged his brow as he gestured toward the sofa. Harij bowed to his prince and quietly dropped into his seat. “Let’s get this over with quick.”

“I’ll get right to the point, then. Five of the seven nobles who collapsed for unknown reasons testified it happened right after they had just had a drink. Four out of five drank wine.”

“Who made the wine?”

“I have investigated the details with the providers. The winemakers, vineyards, and distribution channels all turned out to be different.”

“I see.”

Harij and Yašm had been independently investigating the recent mystery involving Marjan nobles collapsing one after another for unknown reasons. This was outside of Yašm's usual duties, but he took it upon himself after an acquaintance succumbed to the same fate.

Fortunately, everyone affected recovered in less than half a day. Furthermore, the mild symptoms and lack of visible aftereffects made it more of a matter for doctors than the military, but Yašm felt the need to get involved in case things took a turn for the worse.

"You haven't found anything definitive yet?"

Harij quietly answered, "I'm afraid not."

"Keep looking into it. That's it for today."

Harij bowed and took his leave. Yašm heaved a long-suffering sigh as he listened to Harij's footsteps echo down the empty hallway.

Chapter 6: The Little Witch of the Past

GOSSAMER clouds trailed across the sky, melting into a sea of indigo. As the setting sun left, it dyed the mountain's ridges in gold to the chorus of chirping insects.

It was autumn—the season when the dry, cold winds began to blow, and Rose wanted to wear another layer of clothes under her robe.

She should be preparing for winter soon but couldn't get into the mood for it.

“...You're here again?”

For some reason, Safina had shown Rose to the parlor as soon as she returned to the mansion. The words slipped past her lips when she saw Yašm reclining with his legs up on the tufted chaise.

The sun had set, bathing the area in darkness. His presence at this hour meant he had probably been invited to join them for dinner. This was further evidenced by the fact that most of the servants who usually went home by this time were still running about the mansion prepping things.

The droning of bugs and the smell of damp soil drifted in through the opened windows. Yašm snorted, his long black hair hanging loosely around his face as he leisurely reclined on the furniture.

“Put a sock in it. Let's get one thing straight: I've been coming here way longer than you, new girl. Know your place, thieving cat.”

Rose looked around the parlor. Harij wasn't there. Maybe he was giving dinner instructions in the dining room.

“...Hey, you. Hey, *Witch*.”

She finally turned toward Yašm when he called her Witch. She distinctly remembered him stubbornly calling her Rose when she told him to call her Witch before. For whatever reason, he seemed to have changed his mind.

“Are you listening?”

“Listening to what?”

A blue vein bulged on Yašm’s forehead after she implied she wasn’t listening.

“I’m asking if you understand how serious the situation is.”

He must have lowered his voice so Harij couldn’t overhear. Rose didn’t know what Yašm came here to do today, but she had a solid hunch the real reason for his visit was to have this conversation with her.

“He may be the third son of the Azm family, but Harij is still the son of the venerable Heizlan count. I’m asking if you understand what he has sacrificed for the mere sake of being with you. Even his future success as a knight hangs in the balance. How could he stain his reputation by marrying some witch...? Don’t you think it’s only right for you to get out of the picture if you care about him?”

There was something intimidating and powerful about the first serious expression Rose had seen from Yašm. Hidden in his voice were his noble intentions and his deep affection for Harij.

Rose tilted her head to one side as she absorbed and appreciated what he said. “...Uh-huh.”

“*Uh-huh*?! What’s with that dumb reply?!”

“You misunderstand...” Rose locked gazes with the disgruntled prince and explained with a perfectly composed face. “You just made me think how irritating it can be for others to doubt and challenge things you decide for yourself.”

Ever since her grandmother had died, Rose decided everything to do with her own life. She did what she wanted and skipped what she didn’t. She paid the price of those decisions, both good and bad, herself.

Rose couldn’t say if that was the right way, but it was her natural way of life.

And Harij respected that.

“But then I realized I should respect your thoughts and decisions.”

He trusted Rose’s judgment and convictions. His trust became a great source of strength for her. As long as he believed in her, she could take on any challenge thrown her way.

Harij had to be fully aware of the issues Yašm alluded to, which meant he had already carefully thought everything through before letting things reach this point. If sacrifices had to be made, as Yašm said, he wouldn't have made light of the decision—especially if those sacrifices affected others.

There had been plenty of time for him to pull out of the marriage if he felt the need to. But he didn't—he kept Rose by his side and continued to pursue her.

Taking all of that into consideration, Rose had but one thing to do as a witch and as an individual: stand by him.

“You're...less of an idiot than I thought.”

It's settled. As a witch, Rose paid extra care not to mishandle the witches' secret potions, but she secretly vowed to herself just then that she would give Yašm a taste of his own medicine someday soon.

“But as long as you are going to live among people—”

“Yašm.”

Rose and Yašm looked toward the speaker with a start. Harij was standing in the open doorway, frowning.

“Did you have too much to drink?”

Yašm squirmed under Harij's unforgiving gaze. He grabbed his untouched drink off the table beside the chaise and downed it in a single swig.

“Yeah, I think I did.”

Rose pointed at Yašm, who had finished his brandy. “This man mocked my intelligence.”

“I said you're less of an idiot than I thought!”

Harij sighed at their juvenile argument. “...Why do you only pick on Rose like you're some sort of child?”

Yašm leaned against the armrest and unfurled his hand toward Rose in a pompous gesture. “Isn't it only fair since she won't let me give her a proper greeting?”

Rose pulled her hood down further to escape his provocative gaze. “What

greeting?”

“Don’t play dumb. You won’t even offer me your hand.”

“My hand?”

It dawned on Rose as she stared at her hand that it was common courtesy in Marjan to kiss the back of someone’s hand. She had only just recently learned this fact. During the whole wedding dress fiasco, Tien had kissed Tala’s fingers to appease her fury.

Rose naturally had no way of knowing how to behave like a lady when she had neither the training nor the upbringing to support it. Although Harij assured her she could remain a witch, it might be high time for her to learn a thing or two about being a lady.

Situations like this were sure to arise from time to time as long as she was with Harij. She couldn’t care less about how people saw her, but she didn’t want to humiliate him.

And when it came down to it, Rose enjoyed learning new things. The only thing she wanted to avoid at all costs was letting the part of her that was a witch die.

Rose reached out her hand. “As you wish.”

“Not mine.”

Rose grabbed Harij’s wrist to kiss him on the hand, but he used his whole body to stop her. While she was all for learning about manners and the like, kissing or being kissed by Yašm was absolutely out of the picture—even for practice.

No matter how hard she tugged on him, Harij’s arm wouldn’t budge. She was smitten by how cool he was.

Yašm clutched his head as he was forced to watch them play fight.

“Enough. I’ve seen enough. Stop showing off how well you two get along.”

Rose wasn’t trying to flirt, but she quickly stepped away from Harij. She wasn’t used to being teased over her relationship.

“I’m gonna be sick... I didn’t think you were this close and intimate. When and where in the world did you two meet?”

Rose’s heart nearly leaped out of her chest. Harij had come to call on Rose at the behest of his former master—Yašm’s younger sister, Billaura.

But Harij had to protect his former master’s prestige and Rose’s confidential clientele.

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t lie. They also needed to answer this question in a way that didn’t breed distrust and doubt.

He probably couldn’t see her expression under the shadowy depths of her hood, but Rose tried her best to keep her voice flat.

“Well—”

“We met five years ago. In the capital city,” Harij interposed at once, helping Rose.

She could go along with that. It was a fact that he had met Rose five years ago, and one she had shared with Harij. Rose had an easier time working with the truth.

“Yes, we did.”

“Rose fell for me then. Didn’t you?”

Rose was speechless. How did he *know*? Harij’s smile turned to shock when he saw her gaping at him. She immediately realized her blunder.

He was making a joke to get a laugh out of Yašm. Rose was expected to follow it up with a crisp “In your dreams.” Obviously, Harij was positive she would deny it. Since he only recently became aware of his feelings for her, it wasn’t strange for him to think the same applied to her.

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t lie.

Red suffused Harij’s cheeks under his wide eyes. He understood what her silence meant.

Rose flapped her lips in hopes of saying something to throw him off, but only air came out. Both “I didn’t” and “In your dreams” would be too much of a lie

for her.

“...You deluxe dried mountain of slug turd!”

Those were the words that came out at last. Screaming with tears in her eyes, Rose dashed out of the parlor, her robe fluttering behind her.

“What just happened?” Yašm wrenched his stunned stare from the spot Rose had vanished from to his childhood friend’s face—and his expression grew even more disgusted. “You’re acting just as strange. What in the world are you doing?”

“Pardon me...it’s nothing.”

With his palm covering half of his face, Harij was desperate to maintain his flat expression. His lips were sure to curve into a wide smile if he let his guard down for even a moment.

“You did me a great service just now.”

“If you say so...” Yašm responded in an emotionally dead voice.



. . . .

ROSE slipped on the jet-black dress. This was yet another of many dress fittings she had been through.

Tien was chased out of the room they borrowed for the fitting session, leaving only the seamstress he brought over and Mona to look after Rose.

The wedding was just around the corner now. They were doing the final checks during today's session. The seamstress had sewn the perfect dress using outstanding techniques, which was proved by how seamlessly it fit Rose's slender frame, accentuating her shape in all the right places.

She was going to wear dreadfully high heels in order to balance out the height difference between her and Harij during the ceremony. It took every ounce of her concentration just to walk straight in the tight dress and unreliable shoes.

After the seamstress left for the day, Rose fell back on the sofa, exhausted.

"You look beat. Want to have some dessert?"

Rose sat up straight—the proper courtesy for sweets.

She fidgeted as she waited for Mona to finish laying out what Tien had brought. Attractive delicacies decorated the plate—beautiful and delicious at a glance.

"I happened to get a hold of some unusual sweets. Believe it or not, the apple these are made from turns red when boiled."

This type of confectionary, which was made by thickening jam, was shaped like a perfect teardrop. It glistened like a ruby. Tien had explained it was made from boiled-down apple pulp and then covered in sugar.

The apple drops were gorgeous lined up on the plate, but they were exceptionally more beautiful when Rose held them up to the light with her fingers. Light gathered within the transparent pulp, making it shimmer like a gem. Rose had never seen such a red confection before. Just looking at it made her mouth water.

Rose's eyes shone as bright as the sweet when she took a bite. It was soft yet firm enough to give her teeth something to enjoy.

What a robust apple flavor! Every bite was packed with rich juices. The sweet yet slightly tart taste and smell spread over her tongue. Rose licked the specks of sugar off her lips.

“By the way, do you know what this is, Rose?”

Tien carefully pulled a small bottle from his bag as he sipped his tea. It looked like the kind of fancy thing the upper class was fond of.

Rose didn't recognize it. Tien held it out to her, so she returned the apple candy to her plate and went to take it. But she hesitated because her hands were sticky with sugar, so Mona brought her a wet towel. She gratefully accepted it, wiped off her hands, and finally took the bottle from Tien.

“What is this?”

“Want to know?” Tien leaned forward, bringing his face up close to hers. His eyes twinkled like a boy who wanted to boast about the secret fort he just built.

Due to the nature of his job, Tien had access to all sorts of information, but his job also didn't allow for him to leak any of it to anyone—not even his real father in the privacy of their own home.

But Rose was a witch. Witches never shared private client information, nor did they even have an interest in human affairs. For as long as she could remember, she had been an outlet for Tien to air his dirty laundry.

“I obtained it from a certain source. Word has it it's a potion secretly gaining in popularity with the august ones of late.”

“Heh. A potion, is it?”

She had a passing interest in anything dubbed a potion. After all, she made a living concocting potions.

“You remember how I mentioned some of my favorite regulars collapsing randomly?”

“Yeah.”

“Rumor has it it's all due to this. A potion they call ‘the Witch's Love Potion.’”

Mona shuddered as she was trying to clear away the wet towel. As she did,

her hand hit the plate, knocking the apple drops onto the ground, where it almost seemed as if they'd been swallowed. She blanched when she saw them plop onto the rug.

"I-I am so terribly sorry!"

"We don't mind. Do we, Rose?"

Rose couldn't agree. The dusting of sugar crystals on the rug looked like the confections were shedding tears.

"Rose, I'll give you mine. Rose, look at me."

Rose reluctantly wrenched her gaze away from the weeping apple candies. She looked to the frazzled Mona and said, with all seriousness, "Bring these to the kitchen... I will rinse them off to eat later—"

"Rose!" Tien raised his voice to stop her and waved off Mona to quickly take the soiled treat away. Mona bowed apologetically and departed. "I can't believe you have become such a big glutton."

Though he sounded exasperated, he seemed happy to see her develop an attachment to food. Finding that embarrassing, Rose turned her nose up at him.

"Meanwhile, you have always been a *big* schemer."

"Me? A schemer? Whyever would you say that?"

"You purposefully brought up this topic while Mona was present because you wanted her to overhear, no?"

She had no doubt he expected Mona to react to the potion bottle, after seeing her stiff expression when they briefly touched on the subject the other day. Mona was close enough to see the bottle because she just so happened to be nearby to deal with the towel, but Rose was starting to suspect Tien deliberately chose this sticky snack for such a reason.

Tien's foxlike eyes narrowed. "I wasn't sure but decided to take a gamble since you said she was acting funny the last time the topic came up. I figured there was a chance a new maid might have spotted this potion at another noble's mansion..." He slowly lifted his head and spoke to the space behind Rose. "...Say, where have you seen this before?"

Mona, who had dutifully returned to the room, stood in the corner looking whiter than a ghost. Brought into the conversation, she wrung out a pathetic reply. "...I don't know."

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone I heard it from you."

"...Is that an order?"

For those who served nobility, their lord's guest was someone they must never upset, even if they had to go to greater lengths to please them than their lord. Mona's voice was trembling.

"Stop that." Rose smacked Tien on the head when he sat there silently smiling. "Don't go coercing people in Sir Harij's home."

Tien gave Rose an astonished look before his lips quirked up. "Good grief... Not even my own father hits me on the head anymore."

Rose asked Mona to rewarm the still-hot tea, getting the maid to beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen with the teapot.

"What are you trying to figure out, Tien?"

"Hmm... Good question. Judging by your earlier reaction, that's not something you made, right?"

Rose nodded. She didn't recognize the dainty bottle.

"I was planning to have a word with you about its value if you had made it, since the person who let me have it seemed to have obtained the potion at a very reasonable price. But if you aren't the maker...then I can't overlook someone hawking imitations, as someone who makes a living selling witches' secret potions."

The value and rarity of the witches' secret potions would plummet if they became widely available. Even worse, people who purchased the counterfeit potions might start to suspect the quality of the real thing. Tien's misgivings had merit as something Rose must worry about as a witch who took pride in her work.

Rose popped the top off the bottle and sniffed the contents. "...Water?"

"The bottle was already washed out by the time I got it."

Then there was nothing Rose could determine from it. The bottle was a dead end. She might have been able to learn something if there was at least a drop left. Rose had never encountered a counterfeit potion before, so she was unsure how to proceed.

“Now then, how shall I handle this?”

“I strongly advise against you chasing Mona into a corner.”

Rose warned off Tien before he pressured Mona to the point of crying—or, knowing him, beyond that. After seeing how Harij interacted with Tala and the others, Rose realized how much he cared about the people he let into his life. He might even sever ties with Tien if he deemed it necessary to protect them.

“There goes our only potential source of information, then.” Tien pouted with pursed lips, but Rose didn’t take the bait. “Fine, fine. You win. I don’t want to be hated by my brother-in-law or my little sister.”

Who are you calling your brother-in-law and little sister, huh? Rose swallowed her sharp retort with her tea.

Tien seemed to be triggered by his own words, as he set the teacup back on the saucer and emotionally muttered, “I can’t believe you’ll be a bride the next time I see you...”

Surprised by how sentimental he sounded, Rose glanced at him.

Ever since she told him she might get married, he was nothing but ecstatic all the time, as if he had forgotten every other emotion. On the surface, at least, he appeared happier than Rose herself.

He had also relayed the news to his father, whom Rose used to do business with, and convinced him they should accommodate her with anything she needed.

So Tien was the last person she expected to sound disappointed about it.

Just as she was genuinely starting to worry he was against her marriage, he broke the silence.

“The first time I exchanged greetings with you,” Tien began in a nostalgic voice, “you glared daggers at me from behind the Great Witch’s skirt. I had

earned your ire by snagging the weasel you were after in the forest right before meeting you that day.”

Rose didn't remember that. She was flustered over what he might say and was annoyed he had the advantage because she couldn't remember, so she snatched up one of the apple candies on the plate in front of him.

Tien continued his story without commenting on her thievery. “You were eight at the time. You wouldn't let me sleep at all that night. You forced me to read the hundred picture scrolls I brought back from the desert kingdom until my voice cracked.”

Mona, who had just returned from the kitchen, visibly stiffened when she heard Tien say, *“You wouldn't let me sleep at all that night.”* She probably thought she was about to hear a story about her lord's fiancée's infidelity. Ticked off that Tien deliberately worded it so Mona would misunderstand, Rose snatched another candy.

“When the Great Witch found out I let you drink too much cognac to celebrate reaching your tenth birthday, she hung me from a beam.”

Rose didn't remember that, either, but she stole another apple drop, as was her right.

“You poor, naïve little girl... You forgot what I had made you drink, and you begged and begged the Great Witch to let me down from the beam with tears in your eyes because you felt bad for me,” Tien regaled with glee. Rose felt like punching his lights out. Two more candies disappeared from his plate.

“When you were twelve, you did your best to make stew because the Great Witch ordered you to cook, even though you didn't want to. You were crushed because the stew came out a horrifying color, right? The thing is, I secretly added in saffron because I wanted to see your reaction.”

Rose grabbed all the confections on Tien's plate, not caring if her hands got sticky.

“...When the Great Witch entered her eternal slumber, I feared you might join her in heaven. You lost your will to live and were more skin and bones than you are now... I had to leave the kingdom on a job I couldn't neglect no matter how

much I wanted to, but I was worried sick about you the whole time. You didn't have any motivation to keep on living... But then, when I saw you for the first time after getting back, you were acting like things had gone back to normal—I seriously suspected you had picked up and eaten something weird from the forest. Like, did this girl spell herself?"

The last morsel vanished from Tien's plate.

Teardrops plopped into Rose's cup of tea.

"...Please be happy, my adorable little witch."

Rose might have been under a misconception all this time.

After her grandmother's death, she thought she lost her only family. Thus, she believed she was creating a new one with Harij.

But maybe, just maybe, she had a family all along. Family in the form of an older brother who looked out for her from a reasonable distance.

"...I would never strip you of your family after already making you leave the forest you call home."

When Harij had referred to Tien as Rose's family, she'd casually dismissed the idea. But Harij had seen more between them than even she had.



She looked down and stuffed all of those beautiful jewellike candies into her mouth at once. For if she saw Tien's face right then, she might very well cling to his sleeve like a human daughter and cry, "I won't get married!"

The breeze blowing in through the cracked-open window tossed the curtains about. The winds had grown quite cold.

Her wedding was also right around the corner now.

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THE night breeze felt good against her cheeks. From her seat beside the window, Rose looked down below. The Azm mansion entryway was still unlit. No matter how hard she squinted against the milky darkness and perked up her ears, there was no sign of Harij's horse coming down the road.

She wrapped herself in her sheets and a quilt and leaned against the windowsill.

"...Milady."

Rose was scared stiff. She threw her hands out to catch herself from falling out the window. The cup she had been holding fell instead, landing below with a loud crash.

After watching the cup's fatal end, Rose carefully pushed herself back into the safety of the room and turned around, her body drenched in a cold sweat.

A pale-faced Mona was standing there tightly holding on to Rose's quilt. She seemed to have thrown everything she was carrying to grab Rose at the last second, because the ground around them was littered with things not there before.

"P-Please forgive me!"

Rose shook her head and held up her hand. It was her fault for daydreaming in such a dangerous spot.

"No need for that. Please just accompany me to apologize to Ms. Tala tomorrow."

"Of course, milady. Please stay here while I go clean up the cup."

Mona quickly gathered up the items she had tossed on the floor and headed downstairs. She was sure to injure herself by picking up broken ceramic in the dark. Rose followed her with a candle.

“Milady! Please stay in the mansion.”

“It’s fine. I’m used to this.”

Rose stopped the panicked Mona before she hurt herself, and illuminated the area at their feet. Mona rushed to pick up the broken shards as quickly as possible, probably feeling terrible that Rose had to be involved, and she profusely refused when Rose tried to help clean up.

“The wedding is fast approaching. Please take care not to injure yourself.”

Not wanting to upset the maid, Rose settled for holding up the candle to light the ground. Without much else to do, she decided to question Mona.

“Did you want something just now?”

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t you come to my room because you had something to say?”

As of late, Mona had started to open up to Rose. But she still avoided her when her duties didn’t require her presence. Thus, Rose assumed the maid had entered her room for a specific reason this time as well.

As someone who couldn’t lie, Rose was also grateful to be left alone most of the time. Long, meaningless conversations had the potential to lead to life-and-death situations for witches, after all.

That being said, Rose had grown from the introverted, taciturn girl who feared getting too close to people into someone who could hold a natural conversation lately. She had always possessed the skill to avoid difficult-to-answer questions, and it wasn’t necessarily an issue to speak her mind to good and kind people she trusted.

Mona’s hand froze in the middle of picking up a shard, but then she seemed to make up her mind to speak.

“I feel awful about the way I have behaved toward you until now. I am ashamed for having been paralyzed with fear just because you are a witch.”

“...What suddenly brought this on?”

“...I realized my mistake after you protected me from Mr. Công this afternoon.”

Công was Tien’s last name. Mona seemed grateful to Rose for saving her from him. Rose just nodded along. She wasn’t used to being thanked or appreciated.

“What made me think all witches are horrible was because...because I forced someone to drink the potion Mr. Công showed you today.”

When Tien said the potion was going around at a “very reasonable price,” that was by the standards of nobility and traders. In other words, it still fetched a pretty penny. Was Mona actually the daughter of a well-off family? Rose observed her carefully to see if she had any of the telltale markers.

“The young lady I served at my former workplace ordered me to use that potion on a certain man she was fond of... I couldn’t refuse, so I mixed it into his cup and gave it to him.” Mona shuddered as she recalled that very moment. “The man collapsed...after his first sip...”

Mona was fired from her job when the lady of the house came rushing into the room during all the commotion and learned what had transpired. She was given a letter of recommendation as a means to silence her, but never again would she be allowed to step into that household.

Mona was likely plagued by bottomless guilt for unintentionally hurting another. Her voice was filled with sorrow.

Rose gently rubbed Mona’s shoulder.

“...Why are you telling me this?”

“After listening to your conversation with Mr. Công, I thought it might be possible you didn’t make the potion...”

“Of course I didn’t. My love potion will absolutely make the taker fall in love.”

After all, she had tested and proved its effects herself. Rose could claim that with absolute confidence.

Rose was a witch. Witches made secret potions only they knew the recipes for. And as someone who took pride in her work as a witch, Rose didn’t view

the witches' secret potions as inherently evil.

A blacksmith forges a sword to take a person's life, while a witch prepares a potion to take a person's heart.

While unnecessary for the majority, it was necessary for some. As long as a single person needed it, the Good Witch Rose would continue making those secret potions.

But a potion that didn't deliver on its intended effect was indeed evil.

She wasn't the type to go around remedying all the false potions out there. But it was upsetting for others to confuse those inferior products with hers.

"I didn't answer Mr. Công's question because I was shaken, and I didn't want to betray my former mistress... But I thought about it carefully afterward and realized his question was really about trying to figure out how you wanted to handle the matter, milady. And I felt the need to inform you if that was truly the case."

It was likely strictly forbidden to speak of what went on at a servant's former place of work. Mona surely needed to muster all her courage to share that information with the witch she often struggled to be in the same room with. Servants, like witches, couldn't get hired without credibility. Returning to the earth was the only future for both Mona and Rose if they lost their work.

"Thank you. And if I may say so..." Rose crouched until she was face-to-face with the maid. "I think you are an amazing servant, Mona."

Rose wasn't sure how much of the sentiment came across, given that Mona didn't know witches could only tell the truth. But the maid's eyes misted as she wished for Rose's safety.

"If it's indeed a counterfeit, then you might be dragged into unnecessary danger, milady... As it stands, my former lord and lady grew extremely suspicious of witches. Please, please be careful."

"I will," Rose said aloud, as if she were responding to the very darkness itself.

Unfortunately, Mona's bad premonition came true.

Three days later, Rose was arrested.

Chapter 7: The Witch's Love Potion

A tower loomed against the blue sky. In this tower said to be where a witch once imprisoned a princess, a witch was locked away instead.

Light-pink hair fluttered in the breeze blowing in through the open window.

The Witch stared out at the sky through the tiny window at the top of the tower. They must have assumed she would never be able to get down on her own from such a height—there weren't any bars on the window.

In her hand she rolled the apple they'd provided for her lunch. The slightly sour yet sweet smell offered mild solace to the Witch.

The forest dominated her view from the window, but unfortunately, she couldn't see the lake. If she couldn't go back again, then there was no need to concern herself with maintaining the property anymore, but she still worried about the field. She felt miserable for failing to fulfill her grandmother's dying wishes.

This tower built in the corner of the royal family's gardens seemed to have once been a witch's hermitage.

There was nothing to stave off boredom in the room, but she had discovered a large soot stain where a witch's cauldron had once sat on the floor.

CREAK!

The door opened behind Rose while she was looking up at the sky. This chamber only had one door.

"Are you behaving yourself?"

"Yes. I have nothing better to do."

The imprisoned witch—Rose—kept her response brief. Her gaze never left the scenery outside the window.

Two men had entered the room—Marjan's second prince Yašm and the Royal

Knight Geones. Yašm locked the door from the inside and hooked the key to his belt.

“Why don’t you just come clean already?”

“I have already told you that isn’t something I made.”

Rose shot Yašm an annoyed look. She recognized the bottle he held.

He possessed the same item the public called “the Witch’s Love Potion.”

∴ ∴ ∴

ROSE had been at the hermitage when they arrested her.

At the time, she had been sitting on the floor whipping up a Potion to Remove Stubborn Stains from Pots when she heard the bell announce a visitor. She hadn’t seen Harij in a while, so she stopped in the middle of her work and rushed to get him with the boat, thinking he had come to visit after work again.

It wasn’t Harij waiting for her at the dock—but Yašm escorted by Geones, looking unsettlingly more civil than she had ever seen him before.

“Witch, I need to ask you something.”

“Please pay the equivalent price if you seek the witches’ knowledge.”

“Unfortunately for you, it isn’t the witches’ wisdom I seek. I want to inquire about something else.”

He spoke as if she didn’t have a choice in the matter. The foreboding aura caused Rose to stop her boat just before the dock. She answered his query from there, oars in hand.

“What might that be?”

“Do you recognize this potion?” Yašm asked, pulling the counterfeit Witch’s Love Potion from his pocket.

Rose stiffened for a fraction of a second after seeing the same bottle from three days ago—and instantly realized her undoing.

She didn’t come wearing the hood she used to hide her expressions and reactions, because she entirely expected her guest to be Harij.

Yašm didn't miss the tautness in her cheeks, even if it was only there for a passing second.

"I am not the one who made that love potion."

"I have to wonder about that. Why would you be so tense if it has nothing to do with you, *hmm?*"

He had her there. Rose cursed herself for her negligence.

Rose hadn't seen Harij as close to anyone as he was with Yašm. And that was why, deep down, she had come to trust Yašm. She believed him an ally among the humans.

"Also..."

A strong wind whipped across the lake, causing waves to strike the boat. Rose tightened her grip on the oars to stabilize the swaying dinghy.

Yašm's low voice curled toward her in the air like a whisper. "...When did I mention it was a love potion?" His gaze became razor-sharp, and his aura grew tremendously intimidating. "I was going to let it go if you didn't recognize it, but...you have left me no choice. You are coming with me, Witch."

Geones had already left his station behind Yašm and was running at Rose when the phrase "Capture her" reached her ears. He leaped agilely onto her boat, snatched the oars from her hands while she was still in a daze, and rammed his fist into her stomach. She lost consciousness from the strike.

By the time Rose regained consciousness, she was already imprisoned inside that tower. She had nothing better to do in that high tower from which escape was impossible.

"It shouldn't be possible to legally detain a witch."

A witch was different from a normal person, a witch was different from a country, and a witch was different from the law. Witches had been self-governing, independent beings since ancient times. They lived by a different set of rules from humanity. Humans couldn't punish them by their laws even when the witch had hurt someone—such was the binding agreement they had since millennia past.

“That’s true. But as annoying as it is, chalking this up to my being infatuated with you won’t risk breaking our promise with the witches. I can just tell the world that I locked you up because I had fallen so deeply in love with you, I couldn’t bear to let you marry my own knight. That should do the trick just fine.”

Rose’s eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets after hearing his outrageous scenario. She had never heard a worse joke in her entire life.

“It seems you sold this foul tincture en masse to the nobility under the pretense that it’s a love potion. Witch, just admit it, what kind of poison is this? What’s your motive? Why would you indiscriminately harm people? You will never leave this place until you confess.”

“How many times must I tell you it wasn’t me for you to believe it?”

“Then why do you only target the nobility? Is it love that drove you to forget your pride as a witch?” Yašm snorted at the baffled look on Rose’s face. “Some of the people who fell ill were once Harij’s potential marriage candidates.”

Ha. I see. He might not view me as human, but he’s happy to pin me as a jealous woman. Rose wanted to laugh in his face. If she was ever drunk on jealousy, her methods wouldn’t involve such cheap knock-offs. She would whip up her best love potion yet, fill it with another man’s body fluids, and serve it to each and every single one of those girls.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Quit your lying.”

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t lie. But this man had no way of knowing that. Witches loved to talk in vague riddles to obscure the fact that they only spoke the truth. To a human, witches came across as shady. Humans only ever trusted other humans.

Perhaps it was foolish to think I could coexist with humans. Apathy formed in her heart, a heart that had been stabbed one too many times.

“You seem to have already made up your mind to doubt anything a witch says.”

“I have always, always believed witches to be suspicious creatures.”

You locked me up based on your personal beliefs? Rose wanted to roar with laughter. Speaking objectively, wasn't a man with the authority to easily imprison a person with a single word much more frightening than a witch who needed to go through tedious steps just to cast a simple spell? Humans were such contrary creatures, spouting how scared they were of witches when they didn't fear the royal family.

“Six nobles have fallen ill with symptoms caused by this so-called Witch's Love Potion thus far. Strictly speaking, I can't legally keep you here, but there's no way I'm letting you go free under these circumstances. And don't expect Harij to save you.”

Rose snorted. He didn't need to tell her that.

She didn't think for even a second that Harij would come to her rescue. If anything, she felt it obvious he wouldn't.

It was none other than Yašm who'd imprisoned Rose. Harij was a Royal Knight, and Yašm was his prince and current master. He had sworn fealty to his master—he made no such vow to protect his fiancée.

Thus why Rose only looked up at the sky and not down. Should she spot a certain someone among the guard detail outside—were it Harij himself keeping her locked in this tower—Rose knew she wouldn't be able to live another second.

“Hey... Hey, Witch! Are you listening to me?”

Yašm was fussing about something or other by the door, but Rose had utterly shut him out. His hatred for witches must have run deep, or maybe he was just scared of getting cursed, because he wouldn't take a step closer to her. He kept his bellyaching to his spot right beside the only way out.

Seated next to the window, Rose wiped off the apple with her robe and took a bite. A yellow hole opened up in the crimson apple.

What if Harij is down there?

Just thinking about it gave her the chills. She was a thousand times more

afraid now than when that thief had come close to killing her. Did Harij also believe Rose capable of indiscriminately hurting many nobles with falsely advertised potions?

It was more painful to disappoint him. Harij surely held Rose in high estimation. He endeavored to trust the witch who called herself the Good Witch, and Rose herself.

Rose bit into the apple again. She concentrated on chewing to pretend she wasn't affected by all this.

You needn't fear being cursed, boy. Rose internally mocked Yašm, who was blabbing on and on about something from the safety of the doorway. *I don't have a single secret potion on me to curse you with.*

She wasn't dumb enough to think she could escape the tower alone, or that she could take Yašm and Geones down barehanded. It was obvious Rose wouldn't be leaving this tower until her name was cleared.

It was difficult to prove that she hadn't done what he blamed her for. And it deeply scarred her to keep insisting on a point he refused to believe no matter what she said.

Surely no one will ever believe me. She didn't just start thinking that way since being thrown into the tower. That negative thought had been with her since the day she heard those men celebrating her grandmother's death. *"It's for the better if the witch is dead!"* Those words would disappear and return, fade to the back of her mind and come forward again, all along quietly tormenting her. As someone who was just drifting through this world, Rose couldn't change a thing. The townspeople and the servants at the mansion decided to trust the Witch because of what Harij told them.

No one was willing to listen to what a witch—to what Rose—had to say.

"I really wanted to get married," Rose quietly muttered as she stared up at the cloudless sky.

"What was that? Did you finally answer me, Witch?"

"No, I wasn't talking to you."

“What did you just say?!” Yašm shouted in anger. But Rose had already zoned him out again. She traced her lips with her fingertip.

Her own words startled her. It wasn’t as if she had been especially looking forward to the wedding ceremony. She simply thought it was an event that had to be cleared to marry Harij. Having to wear a dazzling dress made no sense to her, and the high heels were torture.

But it was only now that she realized she was actually looking forward to all of it.

A teardrop slid off her chin and splashed on her hands. Once the tears started, they wouldn’t stop. Rose ripped bite after bite off the apple. No matter how hard she concentrated on chewing so she wouldn’t gag, the waterworks wouldn’t cease.

Rose finally let go of the apple. It fell from the open window. She frantically dabbed at the waterfall of endless tears with her palms.

“...!”

Then she heard it—a slight gasp that sounded like someone stifling their pain. Rose stilled.

She recognized that voice—it was the one her ears loved to hear the most.

Holding her breath, she nervously looked down from the open window.

“*Shh.*”

A man was right there—clinging to the tower wall sheerer than any cliff.

It was Harij who signaled Rose to be quiet with that breathy utterance.

Forgetting even how to breathe, Rose blinked in disbelief. Her mind had a hard time processing the fact that the very man she had just resigned herself to never seeing again was right before her eyes.

Harij seemed to have scaled the tower by sticking something like an iron stake into the bricks’ gaps for footing. Tears spilled from Rose’s eyes when she blinked. The droplets landed on Harij’s cheeks.

As if powered by those tears, Harij slammed his hands on the windowsill and

swung himself up and onto the frame. He hopped down from the sill into the tower.

“Darling, I’m home. I’m sorry it took me so long to return to you, love.” Harij pulled Rose into a tight embrace before he finished talking.

Rose moved her lips, but no words came out. Why did he have to make a joke now of all times? For the life of her, she could not understand his comedy.

Rose wasn’t the only person shocked by Harij’s sudden arrival. Yašm and Geones, who had his hand on his sword, stared at him wide-eyed.

“Wha?! Harij! Are you a lizard?!”

“What are you talking about? I’m human from head to toe,” Harij dryly retorted with an exasperated look.

“Yeah, right. Says you,” Yašm muttered, clutching his head. “You aren’t even supposed to be in the capital right now—”

“I wasn’t. I hurried back because I didn’t sense the same emergency there that you sent me to handle. I immediately handed in my leave of absence notice upon my return, so I’m currently off-duty. So, let’s *talk*, Yašm. I’m quite pissed with you.”

Yašm gulped as if he had firsthand experience with Harij’s wrath. “Talk about what?”

“Why did you confine my fiancée in this place?”

“I had good reason to.”

“And I’m asking you what exactly that is.”

“I did it because I learned the Witch’s Love Potion was behind the case I had you looking into for me.”

“I see—Rose.”

“Er, uh, yes?”

Rose had been listening to Harij’s conversation with Yašm in a stupor as he held her close, so she jumped when he suddenly brought her into it.

“Five people—”

“There’s been one more since you left, so six.”

“Six people have collapsed. Is it true the Witch’s Love Potion is responsible?”

Rose opened her mouth and realized she was about to shroud her answer in vague wording again. This wasn’t the time or place for her to spin her words like a witch. She tried to be as clear and concise as possible.

“I don’t know. The one thing I can say for certain is that I’m not involved in this Witch’s Love Potion case.”

“Okay.”

His strong arms tightened around her.

Rose thought she might break down crying any moment now.

That was the most reassuring answer and the most reassuring embrace she had ever received. Harij believed her. He listened, when she had long since given up hope of anyone ever believing her or that her words would ever reach anyone.

Rose was a witch. Witches didn’t lie.

And that was precisely why Harij could believe her without a shadow of a doubt. He transformed her greatest weakness into her greatest advantage.

It never occurred to her that her weakness could lead to being trusted by the people she cared about most when it counted.

Rose’s voice had reached Harij.

“...I know this is a dumb question, but what happened to the guards?”

“They’re all my colleagues. They decided to take a little walk after hearing me out.”

“You’re really something, you know that?” Yašm raked his hand through his hair. He was clearly exasperated with Harij for bringing his personal feelings into this and with the knights who went along with him.

“You’re really something, you know that?” Harij tossed his own words right back at him. He said it in the exact same tone and manner. They sounded so alike, it attested to how much time they had spent together like brothers and

best friends.

“Someone you picked as your knight would obviously stop at nothing to protect the woman he loves. Am I wrong?”

Yašm had no way to rebut that one.

Yašm’s knights held to the same noble principles he did. He surrounded himself with like-minded people. In other words, as hard as Rose found it to believe, Yašm would do the same for someone he loved.

“...Ugh! Stop trying to one-up me! What are you even doing here?!”

“One of my servants immediately notified me when Rose didn’t come home. I left clear instructions for what they should do if anything happened to her.”

Rose looked up at Harij’s face from the gap between the arms wrapped securely around her. He looked terribly haggard since the last time she saw him. Not only did he waste energy on the wild goose chase Yašm sent him on, but he was also doing everything in his power to protect Rose.

“Harij, do you understand the severity of the situation? Six people have fallen ill—from the witch’s potion!”

“Rose said it wasn’t her doing. Therefore, your accusations have no merit. She is innocent.”

“This is ridiculous! You seriously take her at her word?”

“I have no reason not to believe her.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love her.”

Harij’s voice brimmed with unwavering sincerity, leaving Rose no choice but to cover her face with both hands.

Yašm froze awkwardly, as if his head had just been dive-bombed by a bird flying out of the brush. Swaying, he yanked up his sleeves and showed his arms to Harij.

“...See what you’ve done to me, Harij? I’ve got goose bumps!”

“Oh, what, did I make you feel left out? Sorry I didn’t notice sooner. Of course

I love you, too.”

It was Rose’s turn to get goose bumps—the kind that causes all the hair on your body to stand on end.

“Shut up! Stop clowning around! Just who do you think I went through all this trouble for to settle things quietly before the ceremony?!”

“*Ahh*, is that why you picked this spot? This forest is under the queen’s direct control and has been passed down from queen to queen over the generations.”

The current queen was Yašm’s mother. This was the perfect spot for the royal family to settle matters behind closed doors.

But now the situation was even direr if Harij had trespassed into the queen’s private domain against the prince’s wishes.

It was inevitable that his actions would be construed as unpatriotic, disloyal, and a dereliction of duty. Even Rose was able to predict this in this short amount of time. There was no way Harij hadn’t already considered the risks.

He gave “love” as his reason for crossing this precarious bridge.

Was love that powerful? So powerful it made the dutiful, steadfast Harij undertake a selfish and illogical course of action?

“Enough of this! Your believing in her doesn’t undo the harm caused by the potions this witch made,” Yašm ranted while he pulled the small bottle from his pocket, as if he just wanted to put an end to the conversation.

Harij stared hard at the item in his hands. “...Does that still have the potion in it?”

“What good does it do to carry around an empty bottle?” Yašm shot down Harij’s question as if it were foolish.

“Let’s have Rose look at it. She knows everything about potions.”

“You exaggerate; I don’t know everything—”

“You idiot! As if I’d ever give a witch a potion! That’s the same as handing a warrior a sword!”

“Exactly my point. We want the opinion of an expert. Or what? You want to

stay here having a stare-off until morning?”

Yašm frowned with utter disgust and handed Harij the bottle. Harij held the bottle out to Rose.

Rose graciously accepted it and pulled out the stopper. For all his bellyaching, Yašm watched over her with bated breath. Geones moved in front of Yašm and, hand on sword, cautiously watched Rose.

Rose shook the bottle and fanned the scent up to her nose. She stared at it, stunned.

“This...is...”

She recognized it. Rose knew the smell of this potion well.

“Did you figure something out?”

Harij looked expectantly at her. But what flooded Rose’s heart was deep sorrow.

“...Each witch’s secret potion involves different steps and ingredients depending on the witch making it. Since every witch gradually adjusts the concoction passed down in their family to meet the place and time they live in...”

“So? Are you claiming that this potion wasn’t made by you, but by another witch?”

Rose frowned at Yašm’s question.

When Rose first heard about the Witch’s Love Potion incident from Tien, she didn’t believe for a minute that it was indeed one of the witches’ secret potions. But if what she smelled was true, then—

“This potion smells extremely similar to one I made.”

“Then that proves you’re the culprit!”

Rose firmly shook her head at Yašm, who had jumped to conclusions before she finished.

“The opposite, actually. I can’t reproduce a potion that smells exactly the same as a previous one—that is, unless I intentionally endeavor to replicate it.”

Like how no two plants or animals are exactly the same, every potion had slight variations despite following the same recipe.

Witches understood every difference, manipulated it, extracted the truth, and transformed it into magic.

“And I...” Rose stared closely at the potion inside the bottle. “I remember exactly who I sold a potion to with this same scent.”

Rose didn’t want to believe it. She looked at Harij, but even though he had been listening closely, he didn’t seem to understand why.

But once he realized she wasn’t seeking his aid with that look, he pondered it until his eyes went wide.

“...You can’t mean!” An astonished cry slipped past his lips.

“What? What does—” Sensing the sudden change in Harij, Yašm tried to ask about it but was interrupted by a noise at his back.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

All four people in the room jumped. The sudden knocking came from the only door in the room.

No one should have any business coming to the top floor of this tower.

“Who goes there?” Yašm asked, not hiding the leeriness from his voice.

“Oh my, is that you, Brother? It’s me.”

Her voice was as beautiful as a bell cricket singing on an autumn night. Shock instantly colored Yašm’s face.

“Lulu?!”

That was the name of Marjan’s fourth princess.

Harij pried the bottle from Rose’s hand. He moved in a flurry, paying no attention to how confused she was.

He seemed to have come to some sort of agreement with Yašm through eye contact when Rose wasn’t looking, since Yašm said nothing as Harij took action. If anything, he seemed to be buying Harij time as he spoke to Lulu through the locked door.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came when Mother told me she had opened up the witch’s tower for the first time in a long while. I didn’t think I would get another chance to see it if I didn’t check it out now.”

Her serene voice didn’t harbor an ounce of hesitation about doing whatever she pleased.

The knights guarding the tower below probably couldn’t do anything to stop the princess. Rose suddenly felt her body being tugged backward while she was intently listening to Lulu and Yašm’s conversation.

Before she knew it, Harij had moved from his crouched position beside her chair to wrapping his arm around her waist. She glanced up at him, a silent question in her eyes. Harij took one look at her and nodded.

“Cover your mouth. Don’t make a sound.”

My mouth? Rose did as he instructed and covered her mouth with both hands.

And that was when she experienced a floating sensation like nothing before.

This can’t be happening. No, it’s impossible. Only the Great Witches of yore were capable of flying through the skies. And yet, her robe flapped widely around her legs as it filled with whooshing air.

Yes, in other words, Rose was indeed plummeting from the sky. Heading upside down, toward the ground—she had been thrown out the tower window.

“~~~~~!!!”

Fear stole her voice. A deep-blue sky spread in front of her as she fell with her back toward the ground.

Ahh, my life’s over.

Feeling as if she were having an out-of-body experience, Rose had resigned herself to her bittersweet end when she was yanked by something that stopped her free-fall. She dangled there after being pulled into something hard enough it hurt.

“You endured that well.”

Trembling with her limbs still at gravity’s disposal, Rose looked sideways. She hadn’t noticed at first because all she saw was the sky, but it appeared she hadn’t been falling alone. Now that she thought about it, Harij had been hugging her the whole way down.

He must have jumped out of the window with her in his arms. A rope had been tied securely around his waist in case he needed to make a quick escape from the tower. She didn’t dare look up, but he seemed to have tied the other end of the rope to the legs of her chair.

The yank she felt came from Harij slowing their fall by tightening his grip on the rope. She didn’t want to think about what his palms looked like right about now.

Harij placed one foot on the tower wall and held the rope in one hand with practiced ease as he looked up at the tower.

Rose prayed Harij would help her out of her suspended position soon. The rope was considerably long, but they were still dangling in the air.

But Rose’s prayers went unanswered. Harij’s expression turned grim.

“...This is bad. *It’s gonna snap.*”

Before Harij’s ominous words reached Rose’s ears, he kicked off the tower, flipping himself over in the process. At the same time, he let go of the rope while shielding Rose’s head.

Rose’s view switched from the sky to Harij’s broad chest. Faster than she could think *Oh, crap*, the rope tied to the chair snapped, and she was sent plummeting once more.

Rose stretched out her hands to pillow Harij’s head.

“Wha—” His panic-stricken voice reached her ears. The next second, they crashed into the ground together.

Rose didn’t suffer much because they hadn’t fallen from that high off the ground, and Harij had shielded her from most of the impact.

But, in return, Harij took the full shock to his back. Her legs were weaker than

jelly, so Rose rolled herself off him. The moment she pulled away, Harij scooped her up and hid behind a nearby tree.

He glared at her, more furious than any forest demon, before she could get a word in edgewise.

“That was dangerous!” Harij yelled. Although his voice was suppressed to a hushed shout, the same couldn’t be said about his anger. “Why would you put your hands behind my head?! Did you want me to crush them?!”

Rose was startled into shaking. She only understood what she had done after he pointed it out to her.

She stared dumbly at her hands. Those hands were her most important tool of the trade—and she only had two. Even if she managed to escape the tower safely, it would be difficult to continue making the witch’s secret potions and cast magic without those hands.

As someone who had lived her entire life as a witch, being a witch bore tremendous significance to her existence. She stubbornly clung to the ways of a witch because she didn’t know who she was without that identity. She took pride in being a witch. That was why she planned to remain one even after marrying Harij. And yet...

“...I wanted to protect you.” Tears spilled faster than the words. “I acted before I thought...”

Rose stared at her hands in disbelief. The reason her arms were still intact was simply that Harij had reversed their positions in midair.

“...Did you cast a spell on me?”

Harij looked at Rose as if he had been struck by lightning.

He must have sensed her confusion. He gently pulled her tighter against him.

“You already know that I can’t cast magic.”

“Then...how do you explain my behavior?”

“That’s what we call love, darling.”

Rose was stunningly convinced by the words of the man who had just

undertaken a stupidly selfish and illogical course of action for the sake of love himself.

How scary love can be!

Rose shivered after experiencing the horrors of love herself. *To make me act without logic or reason...why, that's just like magic!*

Rose thought of all the different stories Tien used to read to her as a child. True love was always tossed around as the sole power capable of breaking spells. Perhaps that was because love was the only magic humans were capable of.

"...I'm sorry. You must be hurt."

She gently rubbed Harij's shoulders where he took the brunt of the fall. He might have fallen in a worse position because of Rose's thoughtless actions.

"The pain went away."

"Because of love?"

"That's right."

"Guess you don't need a witch's help, then."

"But I need you."

Harij embraced Rose. She gently hugged him back. His arms wrapped even tighter around her until he suddenly went ramrod stiff.

"What's wr—"

"Harij, you're there, aren't you?" asked a voice quieter than Rose's own hushed whisper.

The speaker had neither shouted nor raised their voice, but their words sliced through the overgrown trees straight down to where Harij and Rose hid.

The owner of that voice—Lulu—looked down from the tower window at them while ignoring her brother's attempts to pull her away. Even if Rose looked up, the shadow cast by the high sun obscured the princess's expression.

"Come on out."

She beckoned in a honey-sweet voice as if she were trying to lure out a lost cat. Her tone was that of someone far too used to ordering others around.

“That damn prince with a sister complex... He failed to slow her down.”

Harij clicked his tongue. While Rose maintained her silence as he cursed his boss, Harij pocketed the leather bag he had tightly covered with a cloth. Then he left Rose hidden in the bushes to go out below the tower alone.

“Did you call for me, Princess Lulu?”

“Why, Harij, whatever might you be trying so hard to conceal?” Lulu asked in a childish, cutesy voice, seemingly dissatisfied he hadn’t brought Rose out with him.

“My fiancée. I was lavishing her with my unending affections just now.”

“Oh my! Aren’t you the cutest? I must greet her.”

“She is too bashful for that right now, so you would do us a great service if we could save the introductions for another day.”

“Stay right there! I’m coming down!”

Harij clutched his head—Lulu refused to listen to his plea. She had already vanished from the window and was probably on her way down. Harij sent Yašm a killer smile when he poked his face out the window. Sensing his best friend’s seething rage, Yašm quickly departed from the window, too. He was likely racing down the stairs after his sister about now.

“Sir Harij...?”

“I’m sorry, Rose. You’re going to have to meet her after all.”

“I don’t mind... For that matter, why did you escape the tower in such a reckless manner anyway?”

Meeting Lulu posed no issues for Rose. She wasn’t feeling particularly bashful right now, either. Fleeing like that only worsened their position when she wasn’t guilty of anything.

“It wouldn’t have been wise to have you meet Princess Lulu under those circumstances. And it wouldn’t have looked good on Yašm for imprisoning a

witch when you weren't responsible for those cases, Rose. I'm sorry for putting you through something scary because of that."

"I see... Well, I resent the last reason, but I will let it pass."

If what Harij had said was true, then Yašm let them leave the tower because he believed Rose was innocent.

"Besides, without the queen's permission, you can't even come close to this forest, much less enter it. I let down my guard because most people avoid the area due to its shady history, but I should have guessed Princess Lulu wouldn't mind that. I forgot how much she loves things like this."

"She's full of curiosity, isn't she?"

"She's usually very mild-mannered for her age and is incredibly easy to get along with, but...when it comes to witches, she—"

She's prejudiced against witches? Rose reached that conclusion relatively easy. She thought back to the contempt Yašm showed her when they first met.

"My, my, my... Harij, this just won't do. You must always lend your hand to a lady. A knight must be a gentleman in all things."

She had descended the tower awfully fast. The out-of-breath princess walked toward them. Rose stood with Harij's help and removed her robe.

"It's better if we hide the fact I'm a witch from her, right?"

"I'm sorry for putting you through this. That's a big help."

Rose literally stripped herself of her robe to lend Yašm a hand. She hid it under the brush and stepped out from behind the trees. The princess looked astonished to see Rose with her light-pink locks cascading over her everyday dress.

"...Wha?!"

"...Oh?"

The princess stilled when she saw Rose, and Rose did the same seeing her. The two girls froze like statues as they stared at each other.

"...Is something wrong?" Harij asked, worried that Rose couldn't even hide

her shock. Rose regained her senses with a gasp and took another look at the princess's face.

Lulu's appearance looked far younger than her commanding voice suggested. Rose thought she would be a little older from how she spoke, but she appeared to be around ten. And just like Billaura, she was a stunningly beautiful girl. Her milky-white hair shimmered like a pearl, and her long eyelashes of the same color framed her grass-green eyes. Her petite, round nose accentuated her youthful charm. Her rose-colored cheeks looked soft to the touch.

Rose understood why Yašm struggled to keep her in check. Surely no one could bear to refuse Lulu if she asked for something with that angelic smile of hers.

Yes, Rose felt the same exact way the last time she was faced with this girl.

"You're—"

"L-L-L-L-Lady Witch!"

The princess was the girl who had fallen into the hunter's pit. Comb out her messy hair, change her out of those muddy clothes, and return her dignity, and you have the exact same girl.

Lulu suddenly switched from confidently strolling toward them with an old maid trailing behind her to hiking up her skirt and racing at the speed of light in Rose's direction.

"Wh-Why...today...are you in a place like this?! Why didn't I? Go? Pick you up...?!"

She had spoken with such elegance earlier, but now she fumbled with her words like a toddler just learning to speak.

"...What's going on here, Rose? Why does Princess Lulu know you are a witch?"

The princess knew this at first glance, even though Rose had taken off the robe that identified her as such. She knew because Rose had introduced herself to the princess as a witch without her robe on before.

"Um..."

Rose didn't know where to start. At any rate, she didn't need to bring up those love letters. If she had been the writer, she would never, EVER want those getting out.

"You...love them...that much...?" Yašm panted out after racing his way down the tower and to Lulu's side.

"Obviously! *Aahhh*! It's like a dream to be in your presence again... I couldn't leave the palace *thanks* to my brother here, which must have made me seem so ungrateful, Lady Witch..."

"No way! Please tell me you didn't go to see *this* witch on your own!"

"You aren't one to speak when you seem to be acquainted with her yourself, Brother. You big fat meanie! You knew how much I longed to meet the lady witch you prevented me from seeing!"

Rose also knew exactly how much she yearned for this meeting. In Lulu's sixth letter, she had detailed in four pages just how much she loved witches and how much their encounter meant to her.

In another letter, Lulu explained that she had fallen in love with witches because she had read and reread books written about them. She spoke about the many archives her family had on witches. That made much more sense now that Rose knew she was a member of the royal family. Any kingdom that lived alongside a witch needed to know about them.

"Ugh. I know, I know! You can stop now. You have already told me about it over and over and over and over again so many times that the blisters that formed on my ears the first hundred times have popped and reformed! I'm sick of hearing about witches!"

Apparently, Yašm's hatred of witches could be attributed to his sister Lulu. There's something excruciating about being forced to endlessly listen to something you aren't interested in.

"O-Oh, that reminds me! Lady Witch, won't you please take a brief look at the potion I failed to show you last time?!" Lulu requested with flushed cheeks as she undid her dress collar and plunged her hand inside. She didn't seem to care that everyone was gawking at her in abject horror. Cheeks stained crimson, she

pulled out a necklace and the item attached to its chain from her dress.

Yašm's eyes peeled open when he saw what she had retrieved.

"Wha?!"

Lulu held it out to Rose before Yašm could stop her.

"Um...won't you please look at this? It's my attempt at replicating your Witch's Love Potion!" she confessed in a voice that was all too innocent.

What she held out was a small bottle on a chain. Curiously enough, it was identical to the bottle Rose inspected in the tower.

Yašm flew into action. He grabbed Lulu's hand and dragged her into the tower faster than lightning. Sensing their prince's intent, Harij and the other knights followed him inside, confirmed no one else was around, and shut the door behind them. Then locked it tight so no one could enter.

"...LULU!"

"Eek! Y-Yes?!"

Lulu's eyes were swimming with confusion from the abrupt change in her brother. Yašm was likely always the sweet older brother to her. She must've been startled by the impatience and anger she saw on his taut face.

"B-Brother? Whatever is the matter? You are scaring me..."

"You! What...did you just say you made?!"

"The Witch's Love Potion."

Yašm brought the bottle he snatched from Lulu to Rose. He slowly held it out to her as she grimly stared at it in his hand.

"Witch, is this the same as the one I showed you?"

"Let me check."

Rose graciously accepted the bottle and popped the cork the same way she had earlier. The smell confirmed it—Rose gave a firm nod.

"It's the same."

Rose's answer nearly caused Yašm to faint on the spot. His face was bluer

than the sky and whiter than the clouds.

“Wh-Whatever is the matter, Brother?” Lulu rushed to his side, worried sick.

“Why...why would you make such a thing...?”

“It was so mesmerizing and delightful when I was shown the original...I just had to try replicating it myself...”

“I want to imitate what I like.” “I want to make what I like.” Those are ordinary feelings everyone has at some point in their life.

“*Who*... Who dared to show you something like the witches’ secret potions?!”

“Who, you ask? You must keep this a secret between us, all right? It was Big Sister Billaura.”

“...Did you say...Laura?!”

The unexpected name brought Yašm to his knees this time. He fell back on his butt and hung his head.

“Big Sister Laura showed me, saying it’s her magical charm, because she knows how much I love witches. I was thrilled...and I wanted to show it off after I succeeded in making a good imitation... All my friends said they wanted one when they saw.”

It was easy to guess what happened from there. The relatives of those girls who had received Lulu’s homemade “Witch’s Love Potion” in secret likely confiscated the bottle, mistaking it for the real thing, and then used it to bend others to their desires.

Rose didn’t think it was inappropriate for the group of young girls to keep the adorable bottle filled with their friend’s attempt at imitating the witch she so admired. The same couldn’t be said for the adults.

“This is no good. No good. No good. This is no good, Harij.” Yašm clutched at his head as he crouched on the floor.

“Yeah, it’s bad.”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?! Really, really bad, yeah? We can never let word get out that the royal family was responsible for this...”

“Just don’t get any bright ideas about pinning the crime on Rose. I will never forgive you if you do.”

“*Hariijj!*” Yašm moaned pathetically. From that, it was easy to tell he had every intention of framing Rose. She glared at him through narrowed eyes.

“What is troubling you, Brother?” Lulu asked, staring at her sibling as if his behavior baffled her.

Upon hearing the absolute innocence in her voice, Yašm held his tongue. But his silence lasted only a fleeting moment. Resigned to the fallout to come, he looked straight into those grass-green eyes and gave her the cold, hard truth.

“Lulu...the potion you made caused six people to fall ill.”

“...Oh no! That can’t be true...,” Lulu gasped. A dark cloud fell over her face, which had beamed with pure delight after reuniting with the Witch.

“Fortunately, everyone has recovered. There haven’t been any noted aftereffects to date, either.”

“What a relief... But I never meant to hurt anyone...”

The old maid standing behind Lulu rubbed the princess’s back. Lulu’s voice grew hoarse as she was struck with the gravity of the situation.

“...Witch.” Yašm rose to his feet, his eyebrows furrowed together, and his lips flattened into a straight line. Then he stood before Rose, his expression pained. “I apologize for the rudeness I have shown you... But how could this happen? It’s just a fake made by a child imitating the real thing... So why?”

In response to Yašm’s grief, Rose looked at the potion bottle.

“It certainly is strange.”

She held up the bottle toward the shaft of light streaming in through the window. Nothing seemed amiss even under the sunlight.

Indeed...this “Witch’s Love Potion” was practically the real thing.

“This potion...was made using magic.”

While the potion contained within was incomplete and unrefined, it was a witch’s secret potion through and through. It wasn’t just colored water

imitating the smell and color of the real deal.

Lulu, who was still crushed by the truth, slowly raised her head at Rose's remark.

Rose walked right up to the girl, who was leaning on her maid for support. The witch grabbed Lulu's cheeks and pulled them violently to the right and left.

The center of Lulu's grass-green eyes sparkled.

"What are you—"

"Princess." Rose looked directly into Lulu's eyes and firmly declared, "You are a witch."

Silence dominated the room for a brief moment.

Yařm broke the silence first.

"Witch! Have you lost your mind?!"

"Please don't shout."

"On what grounds do you base your claim that Lulu is a witch?!"

"I cannot view her as anything other than a witch after she successfully created a real love potion by imitating one of the witches' secret potions."

It was hard to believe, but Rose was convinced Princess Lulu was a witch.

What startled Rose the most when she smelled this potion, which she thought was a fake but turned out to be genuine, was that it had the same exact scent as the love potion she gave Billaura.

Only a handful of people would be capable of getting a glimpse at the witch's secret potion Billaura secretly had on her. It wouldn't be strange for there to be only one person in the whole world she would show it to.

"Are you certain Princess Lulu is the queen's daughter?"

"You are stepping out of line with that question, Witch!"

"If you don't want the insight of a witch, you should have said so from the start. I will politely refrain from speaking further on the topic."

Rose was the only person present who understood witches. If he wanted to

know the truth about Lulu, he needed to answer her questions.

“...Lulu and I share the same mother. And I often hear Lulu looks just like my aunt did at her age. We undeniably share the same blood.”

“Then it must have been an ancestor. I can’t say how long ago it happened, but it’s safe to say the blood of a witch mixed into the lineage of either Marjan’s king or queen somewhere along the way.” Rose turned from Yašm to Lulu. “Princess, did your books explain how to make this potion?”

“N-No. They mostly only covered the ingredients...”

“You managed to make a potion of this quality with just that knowledge?”

Rose was impressed. Details describing how to apply magic—the most crucial part of any witch’s potion—weren’t likely found in any book.

Witches were raised by other witches. Rose was astonished, for she had believed that the natural order of things. Was it really possible for a girl with no self-awareness that she was a witch, raised by people who knew nothing of her powers, to become a witch?

Whatever doubts Rose had were sidelined by the fact that Lulu had successfully created a genuine witch’s secret potion—without a teacher, completed recipe, or reliable textbook.

Rose could feel her incredible potential. If Lulu chose to live as a witch, she would surely become a great one not even Rose could compare with.

The royal family possessed a unique lineage to begin with. Each generation was made up of the most elite people in the kingdom uniting their families. No doubt there had never been a witch with a superior pedigree in all the land.

“Did the books mention anything about how you are supposed to give the love potion?”

“No... Most of the books about witches in the royal palace are about the witches themselves.”

In other words, Lulu didn’t even know how to administer the love potions. The six nobles likely collapsed because Lulu’s potion was the real thing. That was the same symptom Harij had experienced close to a year ago when he had

to be carried to her hermitage—a symptom caused by incomplete magic. It was a type of magic poisoning resulting from not ingesting the user’s fluids. The magic that has nowhere to go is trapped inside the body, and the symptoms disappear with the effects of the magic.

“I highly doubt the princess will be tried for her crimes if you officially announce she’s a witch.”

A witch was different from a normal person, a witch was different from a country, and a witch was different from the law.

Witches weren’t protected by the law, and in return, they didn’t have any obligation to abide by the law of man. It was unheard of for a princess to be a witch, but she wouldn’t be punished if she professed to be one.

Yašm outright rejected the idea. “We could never allow that. Even if Lulu has the witch’s blood flowing through her veins, she also has the king’s blood in her. The fact that Lulu is a witch must be kept secret for the future of the kingdom!” Then he turned on Lulu and sternly told her, “You have to be punished. You understand that, right?”

Yašm’s voice petered off into a hoarse whisper, losing its authority and strength from moments before. He probably had no idea how to handle the situation after learning about what his beloved little sister had done.

“...Yes.” Lulu acknowledged her wrongdoing and was willing to accept the punishment that came with it. After a slight pause, she weakly muttered, “But...”

“What is it?”

“I have...a favor to ask of you.”

“Tell me.”

“...Please just don’t tell Big Sister Lauraaa...”

Everyone present gasped in surprise. The girl’s request was just that innocent and pitiful. Tears spilled over from Lulu’s eyes as if the dam holding them in had finally broken. Though she had managed to keep herself together until now, her face crumpled, and she sobbed. No matter how hard she tried to stop her tears,

she seemed incapable of controlling her emotions once they were set loose.

She was probably filled with unending remorse over transforming her beloved older sister's goodwill gesture into an unforgivable crime.

Tears flowed endlessly from Lulu's grass-green eyes. Lulu, the girl who admired witches so much, who wanted to be just like them, had studied fervently on her own until she produced the Witch's Love Potion.

No matter how much someone loves something, some just can't put in the work or time for it. No matter how hard someone tries, some are just not talented enough to achieve it.

Lulu miraculously had both of those things going for her, and yet it was being born into the royal family that severed her future as a witch. Now she would never be able to go near the thing she loved with all her heart and had turned into her only hobby.

Rose squeezed the Witch's Love Potion bottle in her hand and looked at Lulu.

"...May I call you Princess Lulu?"

"Y-Yes! Er, no, um, please call me Luu instead!"

"Very well. Luu, then."

Lulu's admiration for Rose hadn't changed one bit despite the predicament she found herself in because of magic. Rose bent down to eye level with Lulu and nodded.

"I turned you down before, but I will take you on as my apprentice."

"...Eh?"

"I may not be the best teacher, but I hope you will have me."

Rose bowed her head. As if taken by complete surprise, Lulu stared long and hard at Rose's cascading pink tresses. A twinkle unrelated to her tears glistened in those grassy eyes.

"Wait, wait, wait! Stop right there. What the heck happened in the past few seconds for you to say that? I never gave permission for Lulu to become a witch!"

“I heard your decision. This is my decision as an elder witch.”

Rose pulled Lulu against her chest and wrapped her arms around her shoulder to protect her from Yašm.

Lulu let out a tiny cry: “Hyaaaah.”

Rose was elated. Of course she would be—this was her first time seeing another witch who wasn’t her grandmother.

This new witch was talented, motivated in every way, and terribly isolated. Rose gained a desire to protect her as an elder like she had never felt toward anything before in her life.

“Mr....Yašm?”

“Call me Prince.”

“Little Yašm.”

“L-Little?!”

“I am saying I will let you push the blame for this incident on me as you were hoping to do. Be grateful, *boy*.”

Rose was a witch. Witches guided inexperienced, younger witches.

Yašm stared at Rose with wide eyes. Rose quietly averted her gaze from Harij’s scowl and hugged her apprentice’s head.

I’m not used to this kind of thing. It’s not in my character to help others. But if this will stop my new apprentice and my friend—really more of an acquaintance—who married into a distant kingdom from crying, then I am content, Rose thought.

“Just this once, you hear?”



Chapter 8: The Witch Attends a Palace Ball

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

A scream that sounded like rent silk pierced the air, creating a chain reaction of fear that elicited more screams.

The spectacular ball venue suddenly erupted in an uproar—all because a lone witch had entered the palace hall, her heels clicking on the marble floor as she walked.

With each step, the witch’s robe dragged behind her. Every step she took filled the gathered crowd’s faces with dread, and they fled to the edges of the vast hall.

“P-Please stop right there, O Mighty Witch!” One brave palace guard commanded the witch cloaked in a thick robe to halt. The witch’s stunning robe billowed as she turned around. No one could conceal their confusion at this sudden visit.

“Forgive me for not knowing what purpose you are blessing us with your presence for... What business brings you here today...?”

Everyone seemed to believe the shut-in Witch of the Lake had come to douse them in an unwanted curse. The pitifully terrified palace guard charged her with that query, his face hard.

While the modern witches had lost the power to exact wide-scale vengeance, a visit from the witches of yore to a palace ball was usually the precursor to disaster. They loved to reduce the venue to despair by covering the palace in thorns, putting the beautiful princesses into eternal sleep, turning princes into frogs, and all sorts of devilish tricks.

Of course, Rose didn’t have that kind of power.

Rose opened her mouth to respond. Just that slight action on her part caused the guard to reach for his sword as though he were a hero facing a demon lord.

Exasperated, Rose gave her answer anyway.

“...Because I was invited—”

“Rose!”

Harij rushed into the hall behind the palace guard. The startled guard saluted Harij, who only gave him a passing glance before heading to Rose.

“I told you to wait for me.”

“I thought you wanted me to wait for you in the hall.”

“...My heart nearly stopped thinking something had happened to you when I heard those screams. Stop making me worry so much,” Harij pleaded, reaching inside Rose’s hood to tuck her hair behind her ear.

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

This time the hall was filled with even louder screams of despair from the women.

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“**WAIT.** Don’t go over there just yet.”

“But there’s only one left—”

“Just wait. They will bring out more.”

“But that’s the last table with the shiny one...”

Rose wrenched her gaze from the dessert on the table to look up at Harij with the eyes of an abandoned kitten left out in the rain. Her face remained expressionless beneath the hood, but her eager plea seemed to have reached Harij. With his brows knit tightly together, he was obviously stumped for words.

A ball was held within the glittering palace around the time the building was encompassed by the star-encrusted night.

The chandeliers above shone so brightly they seemed to be trying to blanket the fancy ceiling with light. The intricately cut glass crystals swayed, reflecting the gleam of the candlelight. Golden thread embroidered the cloth walls, which had not a single speck of dust.

As if forgetting the previous commotion, the royal palace's ball, which displayed the entire kingdom's extravagance, continued without a care.

Men and women danced in pairs to the orchestra's magical performance. But none of the couples in the hall could concentrate on dancing or the music. Everyone's attention had tuned in to the most conspicuous couple there.

"Sir Harij...please," Rose earnestly requested. Her slender arm poked out from under the robe.

Even to a ball, she wore her witch's robe rather than a dress. She did so because Yašm, the host of the ball, permitted her to attend as a witch.

Nonetheless, Rose had grudgingly dressed up for the occasion because Tala talked her ears off about how "You will be meeting the people His Lordship serves alongside daily, so you mustn't forget your manners."

Half of her hair had been pulled back and braided so tight it felt like her scalp was being ripped off. She also powdered her face, brushed on blush, and rouged her lips. She put Mona through a lot of heartache because her first attempt at makeup resulted in looking like one of the frightening witches depicted in fairy tales.

The brand-new robe she wore was one of the dowry items Tien had enthusiastically given her. He likely had it tailored precisely for when Rose needed to attend formal events with Harij.

It was nothing like the plain robes she always wore at the hermitage. Bold embroidered designs bloomed on the thick, velvety fabric. Every time the chandelier lights hit it, the material glittered, making the witch look even more mysterious and magical.

The hood was a crucial component in the design, as it should be for any witch. When she wore it, the crystals sewn along the rim of the hood hid her expression every time they shook and reflected the light.

"Won't you please grant me this one wish...?"

She begged him with an expression more serious than anything else in the world, but all she really wanted was to just dine upon delicious desserts.

Frowning, Harij glanced around them. He seemed to be confirming that the people he wanted her to meet were currently conversing with others. He took another look at Rose and slowly nodded.

“...Only for a short bit, okay?”

“I’ll do my best to eat as fast as I can.”

“You don’t have to rush that much.”

When everyone saw how lenient Harij was with Rose, commotion spread through the hall like ripples on a lake.

“No way.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Was Sir Azm always so friendly...?”

The women’s whispers went from one ear to another, even reaching Rose.

Rose quickly moved to the table she had set her sights on and placed the dessert in question on her plate with the speed of a cat pouncing on a mouse. Needless to say, Rose was the only woman at the ball who was so engrossed with food.

She had been wholly captivated by a sweet treat that appeared to be layers of marshmallow topped with a shiny, transparent red jelly. The best part was the mint leaf that made it look like someone had turned a beautiful little apple into a shining jewel.

The marshmallow wobbled just from her moving it onto the plate. She carefully cut it with a fork and carried it to her tongue. Cold jelly made contact with her lips. The supple gel encompassing the pillowy white confection guided Rose’s taste buds to heaven.

While savoring that piece of fluffy joy, Rose turned to Harij. “Sir Harij, do you —”

She felt the silent tension radiating off him as she talked with her mouth full, so after swallowing her food, she finished her question.

“...Do you go often? To these kinds of events.”

“Not often. When I attend, it’s usually as a guard. I think I mentioned this before, but I’ve cut off most of my ties to high society since becoming a knight.”

It was incredibly rare for Harij, who hated attending any noble gatherings, to be invited as a knighted guest rather than for his work as a Royal Knight on guard duty. Furthermore, it was difficult for everyone who knew Harij to believe he was there escorting a witch who totally had him wrapped around her little finger.

“It’s been a while since I last dressed up like this, too.”

Harij puffed out his chest to show off his outfit to her. Rose squinted at him because it was near impossible for her to look directly at his formal attire without risking going blind.

This man has an amazingly handsome face. It’s better looking than anything else in the world. Combine that face with his dressing for the occasion, and he’s irresistible.

Formal wear with simple cuts and lines were popular in Marjan. Men’s attire was no exception with their refined designs. The man’s family crest, what his territory was known for, and his own design preferences were all considered when weaving and embroidering the fabric to be used. Harij’s clothing today had a large riding spur embroidered on the back. He probably had it designed to show off his status as a knight who rode his own path in life. Rose couldn’t imagine a better fit.

Internally, Rose fist-pumped the air with glee at seeing him dressed this way for the first time. She couldn’t help feeling as if he were emitting a brighter light than the sun beside her, so she couldn’t stare at him for more than three seconds at a time, but she could still bathe in the sun god’s glory again and again.

He had cleanly slicked back the hair he usually let fall naturally around his face. Rose was on the brink of drooling.

I can’t get enough of this. Viva la formal wear! Balls aren’t that bad if they mean getting to see him like this.

Rose swallowed her drool with a bite of marshmallow.

It goes without saying that Rose had been invited to the royal ball together with Harij today.

Apparently, this was an apology for all the trouble she was put through during the Witch's Love Potion Incident. She couldn't fathom how being invited to an event like this counted as a mea culpa. Still, Harij seemed as if he wanted her to go, and he said there would be lots of delicious food, so Rose reluctantly—really reluctantly—accepted.

Put another way, Rose essentially came to eat at a buffet. She was determined to devour one of every sweet decorating the various tables. After all, it was her first time seeing so many desserts together in one place.

But she hadn't expected that big of an uproar merely from entering the hall. She learned firsthand just how deep the fear of witches went.

The Witch's Love Potion had become a hot topic since the tower incident—and not in a good sense. Scandalous rumors had spread, claiming the Witch's Love Potions were gimmicks.

Although no one was brave enough to come forward and accuse her, Harij had confirmed such rumors were circulating. Rose could overlook the lousy reputation of witches. While it hurt at times, it also served as armor that protected witches from others. But as a witch who possessed absolute confidence and pride in the secret potions she brewed, Rose could hardly overlook the hearsay devaluing her potions.

And yet she decided to tolerate it—because that was the responsibility of a witch who had taken on an apprentice.

The fact that all six victims drank the Witch's Love Potion wasn't made public.

As it was, the so-called victims only experienced the negative side effects for less than a few hours. No one other than the people directly affected should have even noticed there was a problem.

Lulu's name didn't come up in the gossip at all, either.

She had withdrawn from the public eye under the pretense she was sick so that she could privately reflect on her actions for a short period of time. Rose planned to teach Lulu the ways of a witch once her soul-searching was up.

Teaching her how to brew potions was an obvious aspect of the lessons, but first, Rose needed to ground Lulu in the secrets of the witches. Whether Lulu chose to live as a witch or live concealing that part of her didn't change the fact that she possessed the body of a witch.

She might have been able to live a lie-free life until now because of her young age, but she was likely to be thrust into more situations where the truth didn't always work as she grew older. As the elder witch and as her teacher, Rose planned to guide Lulu every step of the way.

Rose snapped out of her pensive thinking when she saw a cart weaving through the sea of people. Eyes gleaming, she tugged on Harij's sleeve.

"Sir Harij."

"What is it?"

"New desserts have been delivered to that table over there."

"...Want to go check them out?"

"Yes."

Rose brushed right past the arm Harij held out to her.

"Rose."

"Yes?" Called to a halt, she looked back. Harij stuck out his elbow, face set in a dead-serious expression. "What is it?"

"Place your hand here."

"Do what?"

What is he saying to do with my hand? It can't be anything decent. Rose inventoried her surroundings and discovered quite a few women had their hand on their man's elbow as they chatted. She needed a lot of courage to be the one to initiate that kind of intimate touch.

Harij swiped the empty plate and glass from her hands and handed them naturally over to a waiter.

"Your hand."

"...Yessir."

Prompted by Harij once again, Rose reluctantly rested her hand on his elbow. She stepped in closer to make it easier to walk—so close she couldn't bear to look up at him.

Rose grimaced as she walked, trying her best not to notice the red-hot glow emanating from her cheeks. Harij's stride wasn't too wide or too short—it perfectly matched hers. *He's probably used to escorting women.* Her brain was on the verge of shorting out from a blend of bitterness, embarrassment, and sorrow.

Rose was unaware she was being picked apart by the women's unfriendly gazes. But she did hear the nasty things they said about her in loud whispers meant for her to hear.

"Lord Harij is letting his arm be sullied by a witch..."

"Oh my heavens, is *that thing* there really the witch? Isn't the witch supposed to be over two hundred years old...?"

"Perhaps it's the work of magic? She can probably do something as petty as reverse her age with magic, no?"

"But I've heard rumors that the witches' secret potions have dropped in quality lately."

"Who cares about that? The real problem is why is the witch here...being escorted by Lord Harij?"

"Lord Harij already has Prince Yašm."

"She doesn't belong here."

Some of their remarks made no sense, but the women's gossip ramped up in its viciousness as if they knew no fear. Clearly they had forgotten the very witch they had screamed in terror of was standing in their presence.

A maiden in love could take on even a scary witch. Driven by her one-sided feelings for him, Rose herself had fearlessly ordered Harij to cut out the liver of a fire rat intoxicated from the ultrasonic waves of a muffler bat for her. Love made people do frightening things.

"Then the rumors that Lord Harij is getting married were true...?"

“You don’t think *that’s* who, right?!”

“No way. Please tell me it’s a lie...”

“She must have caught him with a love potion.”

“Yes, I did,” Rose said, stopping to join in their conversation.

They never expected the witch they were bad-mouthing to actually respond. The women trembled, their eyes wider than those of a deer surrounded by wolves. Rose decided to keep talking anyway since this was the perfect opportunity to straighten things out.

“However, the witches’ secret potions won’t serve their intended purposes if you don’t use the correct dosage or follow the exact directions. Please be sure to inquire with the witch herself over how to use it and what the correct dosage is when you purchase one.”

“Huh?”

The young women made strange faces. Rose drove the point home to make sure the same incident wouldn’t occur again, although she wasn’t sure how effective it would be. At least it was better than saying nothing. Actually, it appeared the Witch’s words had more effect than Rose thought, as some of the women looked away and quickly dispersed.

Those women seemed to know exactly what she was talking about. Perhaps they had a bad past experience purchasing a Witch’s Love Potion for cheap and finding it didn’t work when they used it without following any instructions.

Harij stared down at Rose, who was blandly watching the noblewomen flee, with a wry expression. Sensing his gaze on her, Rose gulped, expecting the worst.

“I-Is something the matter?”

“Didn’t I tell you this before? I fell for you long before I ever took that love potion.”

Their surroundings grew unusually loud. Like the sound of leaves rustling amid a heavy storm, like a dog rushing into a flock of sheep—everyone was making a commotion.

All that was left after the ripple of surprise passed was silence. Everyone widened their eyes in astonishment but then quickly averted them as if they had witnessed something that shouldn't be seen, and promptly left.

As for Rose, she couldn't wrap her head around a response after Harij's unexpected fastball. She opened and closed her mouth rapidly like a fish gasping for air.

"Er...would you mind leaving it at that?"

It was none other than Yašm himself, the host of the ball and the second prince of Marjan, who broke the silence.

Guards in tow, he gallantly walked up to Rose, who had a conspicuous lack of people within a reasonable distance around her. Harij swept into a bow, but Rose held her upright position as she watched Yašm.

"Thank you for coming today, Witch of the Lake—nay, Lady Rose Azm."

Screams erupted from every direction again. A leery expression crossed Rose's face.

"I am not in a position to be called that yet."

"Then *Future* Lady Rose Azm?"

"...I believe you invited me here today as a witch," Rose said without hiding her ire.

According to Harij, there was a special meaning behind inviting Rose to a royal palace ball as a witch. Partly this was because it was unprecedented for a witch to be invited, but it was even more unheard of for a witch to marry a Royal Knight.

For Yašm to invite Rose as a witch signified that the royal family approved of witches.

Rose didn't care about such things, but it seemed to be a very important gesture to Harij. Taking Harij's feelings into consideration, she had no choice but to come for the buffet.

"Have you gotten used to the world of man?"

“Mankind is having a harder time getting used to a witch.”

“Witches are the same as dragons and phoenixes to us. Everyone hesitates to come in contact with them even though we know they exist. Harij has gotten his hands on a good helpmeet.”

“I’ll be Harij’s partner but that doesn’t automatically put me at your beck and call, Prince,” Rose stated in a loud enough voice for the nearby nobles to hear. “If it is potions you seek, then please use your own two legs to come to my lake and purchase them.”

After hearing this superficially polite but intentionally rude reply, Yašm pointed at Rose. “Your wife doesn’t pull any punches, does she?”

“She’s a strong woman who knows how to handle herself. I couldn’t have asked for a better partner.”

Harij veiled his barbed remarks because they were in public. They still inflicted their intended harm, as gooseflesh rippled along Yašm’s neck when he saw Harij swelling with pride.

“Why don’t you let him off with that, Sir Harij?” Rose shook her head as she tugged on his sleeve. Harij backed down, though he looked as if he had much more left to say.

Yašm waited to speak to Rose until the gooseflesh that had spread all the way up to his cheeks had settled down. “Then I will have to make my way there soon and try the famous secret potions you make for myself, Lady Witch. You will give me a discount, won’t you? As a friend of your husband.”

“I shall charge you the exact full price, down to the last single digit. Also, you will have to wait your turn like everyone else. A witch shows no favoritism.”

Rose suddenly realized why Yašm had invited her to the royal ball today and why he’d permitted her to attend as a witch. It really was turning out to be an apology for what he did to her the other day. The memory of being imprisoned as a criminal in the tower was still fresh in her mind.

Witches didn’t show favoritism to even the royal family who ruled this kingdom. With that statement and Yašm’s backing, Rose had gained a powerful card to play, should she need it for anything that came up during her time with

Harij.

“You drive a hard bargain. I won’t push for a discount if you will dance with me instead. Deal?”

“Come again?”

Rose couldn’t comprehend a word he said—was he speaking a foreign language? Who would be dancing with whom?

Yašm naturally offered her his hand. Rose stared blankly at his palm. Today was the first time she had ever *seen* someone dancing. She had never even imagined herself doing it with another person.

Everyone watched with bated breath to see what the Witch would do next.

Rose took a step back to flee. Then she put her hands on Harij’s back and pushed him into her spot.

“Then, Sir Harij, if you please.”

“...*Rose.*”

Rose screamed inwardly as Harij’s icy gaze became subzero. She squirmed under her robe. *I love this look on him, too!*

“If you will take this bullet for me, then I p-promise to...p-partake in the sp-special vow-making process at the ceremony.”

He immediately realized she was talking about the concessions he’d made when Rose had broken down crying and hugging her knees and had said, “*I absolutely can’t kiss during the wedding!*” Creases deeper than fault lines formed between his brows.

“You aren’t pulling my chain, are you?”

“A witch never goes back on a promise.”

“Then I will take your word for it.”

I might have just made a deal with the devil. Rose bit her lip. But no matter how miserable this promise might make her later, it was still ten thousand times better than taking the prince’s hand and dancing.

Harij placed his hand on Yašm’s with a demonic look on his face. Yašm’s

cheeks twitched as cold sweat dripped down his chin.

“You’re joking, right?”

Rude as it was, Harij didn’t answer him.

Music slowly started to play over the scandalous whispers spreading through the hall. Yašm and Harij both looked heavenward. This music beatified their demise. No doubt neither would ever want to hear this song again.

The subdued whispers changed to cries of glee. In the middle of the hall, Harij danced to the rhythm with Yašm looking sicker than a man who had just been told he only has a few days left to live.

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“**WELL**, that’s that, and this is this.”

Rose unglued her icy gaze from the two men enjoying an intimate dance. She picked up one of the glasses left on the table. Who had left that there? Rose held the half-empty glass up to the chandeliers. Tiny air bubbles floated to the top and popped.

After secretly taking a small bottle from her robe, Rose hid and poured the contents into the glass.

Yašm and Harij happened to return as she finished. They seemed to have wrapped up their dance with just one song. No one dared to speak to either of them. Everyone pretended not to have seen, unwilling to poke that hibernating bear.

“Your bride is crazy.” Yašm criticized Harij after fulfilling his end of the deal. This time, Harij didn’t stand up for Rose.

“You worked up a good sweat out there. Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Yašm accepted the glass with an expression that said, “You can say that again!” He downed the liquid with a single swig. “...!”

Did he sense something amiss? He immediately peeled the glass from his lips—but the contents were already gone.

Yašm’s hands shook as he placed the glass on the table.

“Rose, what did you—” Harij shot a look at Rose when he noticed the shift in the prince’s behavior, but Rose was looking straight at Yašm.

Yašm was glaring spitefully at her.

“What have you—”

The corners of Rose’s lips curled up. She rarely smiled in front of others.

She softly brought her lips near Yašm’s ear as he ground his teeth. Then she answered him in a hushed whisper no one else could hear. “...Did you enjoy your taste of the Witch’s Love Potion?”

The anger immediately drained from his face. He held up his hand to stop the royal guards from rushing over. He had turned a pitiful shade of blue.

Rose gently pressed the used bottle into his hand.

“Don’t worry. Rumors say it isn’t very effective.”

Rose had one of the Witch’s Love Potions Lulu had made on hand. She had searched out the one Lulu had dropped in the hunter’s pit and found it buried under a pile of leaves.

Recognizing the bottle in his hand, Yašm glared at Rose, speechless. His eyes were bloodshot, and his breathing heavy. His heart must’ve been pounding like crazy. He was surely dying to run around in search of the person whose saliva had been mixed into that champagne.

Rose dropped her voice a whole decibel and whispered, “I haven’t forgotten the punch to the gut you made me take at the lake.”

Rose had been holding it against him ever since that day. Even if he uttered words of apology, tried to reform his view of witches, and invited her to a buffet to pretend to be friends, it didn’t change the fury seething inside her.

Her stomach still ached under the corset. The bruise from Geones’s fist hadn’t healed yet. The knight hadn’t held back his strength even though he’d hit a woman who was all skin and bones.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Even if humans and witches lived in different worlds, this was the law of nature. She didn’t take away his memory or make him fall ill—all she did was make him fall head over heels in love with

someone.

The witch sneered as she walked away from the pale-faced prince.

“I can’t wait to see who you fall in love with. You have my sincerest prayers that she turns out to be a cute young lady.”

Epilogue: The Witch's Wedding

DING-DONG, DING-DONG...

Bells tolling good luck and prosperity rang throughout the royal capital. White doves soared through the sky, delivering messages of love and peace to all the people.

The doors to the cathedral, which reached into the heavens, opened. The invited guests turned around and applauded.

Dazzling sunlight spilled in through the wall covered from floor to ceiling in stained glass, projecting stunning patterns onto the floor and walls. The huge image illuminated within the stained glass depicted the god of love.

A man and woman dressed in their finest clothes entered through the open door and walked down the aisle decorated by the image cast by the stained glass.

The bride wore a black wedding dress, earning surprised stares from everyone gathered.

Her bell-shaped skirt was layered with many ruffles at different heights. The hem of each ruffle ended in frills, giving it a soft appearance. The shawl worn over her shoulders was wide enough to cover her entire back. Adorned with golden tassels, it looked soft enough to cuddle up with.

The thin, gauzy silk veil she wore was also black. The fabric, which shimmered dark blue depending on the amount of light that hit it, made the Witch appear even more mysterious.

With every step the Witch took, her long train drew a wave across the floor. The jewels adorning her chest and the golden beads woven throughout the dress reflected the light of the stained glass and twinkled like stars on a clear night. The dress was as gorgeous as a star-studded sky.

The groom was also wearing clothing fit for the occasion. He had dressed in

his knight attire, decorated handsomely for formal events. A medal glinted on his chest. He wore a vivid blue cloak over his right shoulder and a glamorous ceremonial sword at his waist.

The bride in her black wedding dress gracefully headed for the altar led by a groom in his knightly regalia. Once the bride and groom arrived at the altar, the applause stopped. The priest waiting for them nodded after taking a good look at both of their faces.

“The groom, Harij Azm.”

The solemn ceremony began by addressing the name of the groom.

“Do you swear to God to take Rose to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?”

“I do,” Harij replied in earnest to the oath the priest said for him. His commanding voice echoed to every corner of the cathedral.

“The bride, Rose.”

Hearing her name said by the priest, the bride lifted her eyes, her vision obstructed by the veil.

“Do you swear to God to take Harij to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward...”

Knowing she would be asked the same thing as Harij, Rose stole a peek at him beside her. Harij kept his eyes trained forward. Rose had already reached the peak of happiness when she saw Harij had granted her greatest wish and wore his formal knight attire. She was so taken and moved by his handsomeness, she cried a little before entering the cathedral. When she thanked him through her sniffles, he responded with an exasperated “You wanted to see it that bad...?” Yes, yes, she did. He looked that awesome.

Harij glanced at Rose. He must’ve noticed she was charmed by his looks again. He narrowed his eyes as if to silently tell her, “Eyes forward.” Then he pressed his hands together in prayer and faced the altar again with a solemn expression.

Rose had trembled before the majestic building that was unlike anything she

had heard of or seen, much less visited. So she was glad she had regained most of her composure after seeing Harij act like normal.

She followed suit and faced forward. This regal building and the ostentatious guests were little more than decorations used in the background of Harij and Rose's marriage.

The true point of this wedding—what mattered most to Rose—was her own feelings.

I'm really going to make an eternal promise to marry this man. Rose felt overwhelmed by emotion once again. A piece of her was scared that this day had finally come—but she was filled with even greater joy.

“...in sickness and in health...”

The priest must have noticed the bride was daydreaming—he tried to draw her attention back by overemphasizing each of his words.

Rose was, in fact, lost in thought. Once he saw her focus had returned to him, the priest finished the question to receive her answer.

“...until death do you part?”

Rose was a witch. It was an unarguable fact that witches didn't worship any god.

Rose couldn't swear a vow to a god she didn't revere or even believe existed. After all, Rose was a witch incapable of telling lies.

She slowly closed the mouth she had opened to answer.

Silence fell over the cathedral. Scandalous whispers spread through the guests when the bride refused to give her vow for what felt like an eternity.

Rose slowly turned her neck and looked at Harij. He stared right into her eyes.

“I do.”

Sighs of relief filled the room. Oblivious to her surroundings, Rose earnestly held Harij's gaze and continued her vow. “I swear my life to you, Sir Harij.”

The Witch calmly swore the oath she was comfortable with. Even if she tried to imitate human tradition by swearing under their god's name, the pledge

wouldn't come from her heart. Thus, she swore in Harij's name to make it as binding and true as possible.

Harij, who had been scrupulously following along with ceremonial tradition, suddenly raised his hand with his fingers perfectly aligned.

"I'm sorry, could you wait a moment?"

"Of course."

The priest generously agreed, for he knew love well. Thanking him, Harij pressed his fingers between his eyebrows as if enduring some great pain.

What's his deal? Here I mustered all my courage to swear to him while hiding that I'm so nervous I might start shaking. Dismayed, Rose shot Harij a questioning look.

Unlike Rose, who didn't have a clue what was going on, the priest seemed to fully understand the situation.

Meanwhile, she heard an odd wet sniffing coming from the guest seats. Curious what it was, she glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes widened in surprise under her veil.

Of all things, she found Tien there, crying his eyes out in formal wear rather than his usual over-the-top clothes. He accepted a handkerchief hesitantly held out by the person sitting beside him and blew his nose while mumbling, "Sowwyy."

Rose felt something like a hot lump form in the back of her throat. She had never seen Tien cry before. She never expected the man who was always smiling and aloof from the world to cry from seeing her as a bride.

The memories he had shared with her the other day came rushing to the forefront of her mind. Sure, he made her cry a lot, but thinking back on it, she had caused him a lot of worry and trouble. She wondered who, other than Tien, would have stuck around so long being such a good friend to a witch?

Why is it Tien who's making me feel like crying at my own wedding? Rose pressed her lips tightly together. If she didn't do that, she feared tears would spill from the corners of her eyes and ruin the makeup Mona had spent so

much time doing for her.

“Ahem.” The priest cleared his throat.

Maybe there really is a god, Rose thought, grateful for that distraction that let her get away with a single sniffle and no tears.

But her moment of relief ended there.

“You may kiss the bride.”

What did he just say? Rose’s eyes bulged as she stared at Priest Ahem.

Harij stepped up to her while she was busy glaring down at the priest. Startled, she swung her restless gaze to Harij. In that time, he had brought his body within intimate distance from hers, his expression cooler than the surface of the lake.

Then he lifted the black veil off her face, exposing her misty eyes.

Here Rose thought Harij had prepared the veil to conceal her expressions since he knew the witches’ greatest secret, so when he pulled it off himself, she didn’t know how to react.

Her brain was in a state of pandemonium, but her face was so trained to remain expressionless, Harij didn’t notice. He cupped her slightly taut cheek in his palm. Apparently, he took the tightness to mean she was nervous.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb to help ease her nerves in a way no one else could see.

No, no, no. You don’t get it! Rose pointed out in her heart.

Harij was the primary cause of her consternation.

She didn’t know what was about to happen—no, she consciously diverted her mind away from what she’d rather not know, but she couldn’t escape it any longer. He lifted her chin and leaned in. As clichéd as it may be, Rose thrust out her hand.

The air instantly became electrified. Harij grabbed her slender wrist and moved her hand away from his lips.

“...Rose.”

His voice rumbled like hell's gatekeeper rather than a man speaking at his wedding. Rose was also starting to comprehend that wedding ceremonies were supposed to proceed with more solemnity and grace, but she couldn't help herself. There are some things you just can't yield to.

"Th-This isn't what we discussed!"

"And who do you think is going back on what we discussed?"

Rose had certainly conceded to kissing during the ceremony. She promised she would. But the situation at hand exceeded what she had imagined!

"P-People are watching!"

She was only expressing the modesty any being that spoke and walked on two legs should have, and yet it earned her the most pitying look yet from Harij.

"I guess I forgot to tell you. The kiss you share at a wedding is normally done in front of people."

"Why is that necessary? It's outright shameful!"

"Rose, I said you didn't have to. But then you gave your consent. It became a done deal at that point."

Rose couldn't believe her ears. When she'd heard this kiss was a necessary part of the ceremony, she was under the impression they would move somewhere else for it. Never in her wildest dreams did she think they wanted her to kiss in front of not only people but also the god they worshipped.

"...A-Are you sane?"

"As sane as can be."

She thought she was going to faint. If she could have, she would have swooned on the spot.

Rose was a witch. Witches honored promises.

And Rose had made a promise to Harij. The exchange was kissing during the wedding ceremony in return for Harij dancing with Yašm in her stead at the ball. This was a pit she had dug herself.

"But this, this is just..."

She looked to the priest for salvation and then to the guests, but aside from Tien, who was clutching his head, everyone looked at her funny. This look was different from the one usually filled with contempt for the witch.

Their gazes were tender, as if they were stopping themselves from laughing at the innocent girl with bright-red cheeks.

“Eyes! No eyes!” Rose swiveled back toward Harij. “Everyone, please close your eyes!”

Everyone in attendance showed their respect to the adorably shy bride by covering their eyes. Even the priest closed his. Rose’s legs were shaking so bad, she was close to falling over. Her face was so hot she could almost feel steam coming off it. Harij patiently waited for his new wife to be ready without making a single upset face over her delay. Wanting to reward him, she tightly shut her eyes and lifted her chin.

Harij caressed her cheek in one hand and wrapped his other arm around her waist. And then, at last—

The End





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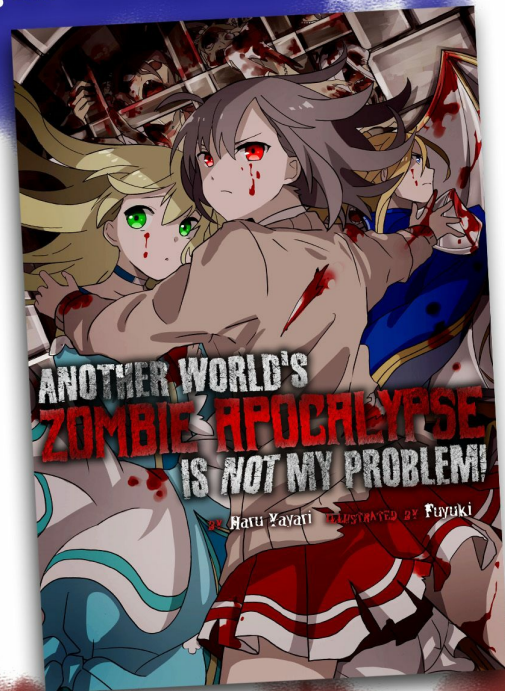
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